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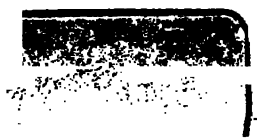
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MARCEL LEVIGNET

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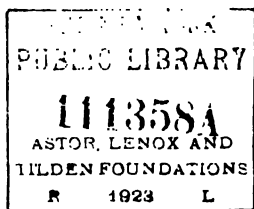
MARCEL LEVIGNET

BY
Elwyn Barron
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Author of "Manders," etc.

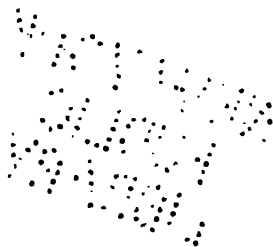


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MARCEL LEVIGNET



Marcel Levignet

I

LOITERING down the stairs of the Grand Opera House, rather glad to get away from an indifferent performance of "Faust"—for it was the summer season—I came upon my friend of the boulevards, Marcel Levignet, leisurely puffing a cigarette in the lower promenade.

Levignet, though a man of light humour and sunny temper, was the personification of grief when in repose. "Good Monsieur Melancholy," I named him, borrowing the phrase from Orlando. But his was a sweet pathos, that attracted sympathy and won regard. One felt the impulse to lock arms with him, bear him off to some snug corner, and, over a consolatory bottle, bid him unburden his heart of its sorrows. If, however, Levignet had any memories gnawing into the treasury of his soul, he never betrayed it in word or conscious sign, for a more cheerful good fellow never gave wings to heavy hours. To touch his arm or speak his name was to turn on an animating current to illuminate with pleasure his sallow countenance, made darker by the abundant white hair that fell over his

shoulders and the grey moustache that could not conceal a smile the most persuasive.

"Will you go back for the third act?" I asked, lighting a cigar from his cigarette.

"It's a deuced bore, you comprehend, to listen to opera without singers. The ballet is well enough, if only you didn't have to suffer those voices. I think I shall not go back. And you?"

"I was escaping when I found you."

"Are you alone?"

"The same thing. My friend is a 'Faust' enthusiast. He will stay. He sings to himself, you know."

"The devil! Those fellows. One sat behind me. He kept me awake. You cannot scowl them into decency. They are democrats. He will join you?"

"After the opera."

"Well, you have two hours on your hands. What will you do with them?"

"Anything. They are yours, if you will have them."

"You are very kind with your gratuities; but it is too early to make use of them."

"We might stroll down the boulevard."

"You see I have my third leg," holding to my view an uncommonly stout stick. "I never play the dandy with that."

"An accident?"

"No; a memento of '71 that occasionally reminds me that I fought for the Third Empire."

"You never told me you were in the war."

"Every Frenchman with heart enough to hate a Prussian was in the war. But I never think of it until I get the knee-ache. Heaven! it hardly cracked a bone, and yet—without doubt those Germans poison their bullets! Which way shall we turn?"

We were now at the Boulevard des Capucines, and the café tables on the pavement were rather inviting to a man an-hungered and athirst, for I had driven in after lounging the day away at Versailles, and had missed my dinner. I proposed that we sit down for a bit of something and a glass to wash it down.

"Not here," dissented Levignet; "I should not have a moment's peace with you. It is a pest, let me tell you, to know every café loiterer, trousered and frocked, that just fails of respectability. The Riche is but a pistol-shot away. We can slip into a snug corner and be alone. It is the swarm of foreigners—the English and you Americans have a way of taking possession of it. But you pay for it. I will—what do you say?—stand treat."

We were already moving in that direction, but I affected to demur, being willing to let him pay the shot provided he would agree to tell me, as we

ate, a half-promised story of the Third Napoleon's *coup d'état*.

"That, and another very much more piquant. For example, did you ever hear the story of the grand fête in the Tuileries gardens, when nude young women were perched on pedestals as statues? My faith! you look incredulous. But it was so. Humph! It was not all unchecked wantonness, just the same. A stout old soldier of the guard stopped before one of these unfortunates of imperial caprice, levelled his carbine and—piff—one of the pedestals was empty. In the old Roman days, a father had such rights, but in modern France—especially when the matter in a measure disturbed the serenity of a festival—it was not to be countenanced. There was also a vacancy in the guard. Ah, well! Monarchs must be amused, you know. True? On the honour of a soldier. No doubt there is a record of it. Some day the *mémoires* of Louis Napoleon will be written without political reserve. If you live to read them—well, you shall marvel. Ah! if they only dared set down plain truth about the first Napoleon! That man was in more ways extraordinary than at the head of an army or on the throne of the Bourbons. But you and I, how shall we measure or sit in judgment upon genius? It is a world and a law unto itself. Nature makes her own averages. Extremes in one direction necessitate extremes in the opposite. A

great soldier may want morals. What goes to make up a particular genius must impoverish other qualities. Is it not so?"

When we arrived at the café there were few persons at the tables, the hour being early. Levignet was to be communicative, I saw, and I congratulated myself upon that timely escape from the opera. He proceeded to the business of ordering a little supper, giving his directions very carefully about the wine, which he wanted chilled to an exact degree, and after the excessively dignified waiter had gone, rolled a fresh cigarette and settled himself to be very much at ease.

Levignet's air and appearance were an agreeable compromise between the military and the artistic. He had the comfortable nonchalance of terrene proprietorship that the vulgar strive for, but which settles upon the man of the world only after he learns in all schools of experience that unperturbed amiability and perfect willingness to let every man hold by his own opinions are the highest social achievements. I thought him the most enviable creature living as he leaned lazily back, blew a cloud of smoke, and said:

"Now we may be happy!"

"I shall be happy," I responded, smilingly, "if you will tell me the story of the pile of thousand franc notes."

"That Louis Napoleon stole from himself?"

It was very droll. Rather a clever way to kill off his troublesome partners, Cornemuse and St. Arnaud, but far from honourable. As the story goes the Emperor, one morning, received from these gentlemen a more than commonly imperious demand for money, and resolved to put an end to these reprisals. But how to do it? Suddenly a plan suggested itself, a bit of strategy, a trick to set them to fighting. He proceeded to act upon it at once—— Mon Dieu! It is 'Toinette!'

II

A STRIKINGLY handsome woman entered the room as he spoke, leaning upon the arm of a man of distinguished appearance despite the fact that he was slight and but little above the medium size. She was slender, but of those gracefully symmetrical proportions that appeal so strongly to artistic sensibilities, and bore herself with a harmony of proud dignity and languorous ease, possible only with a woman long accustomed to universal admiration and conscious of her right to admiration, yet quite indifferent to those over whom the spell of her enchantment is cast. She was, perhaps, five-and-twenty, but in her face—a perfect oval, of the colour of ivory just touched with the crimson glow of warm young blood—there was the indefinable evidence of a mind early matured and fashioned in the school of experience. Her dark eyes, shadowed by uncommonly long and curving lashes, were luminous of a joyous spirit, tinged in a perplexing way by sadness. Her hair black, with a faint gloss, its natural tendency to curl manifest in the ripples of its broad folds, was caught negligently over a broad, high brow indicative of intellectual qualities and force

of character, as her mouth and delicate nose were of aesthetic sensibility. An air of the utmost refinement completed the fascination of a beauty enhanced by the quiet elegance of her attire. She and her escort took seats at a table in one of the angles of the room, and, as she sat against the white and gold background of the wall, the vision of loveliness was quite enough to justify the exclamation of Levignet:

"Divine!

"And yet," he added, "she is not celestial, either."

"You know her?"

"I know that if there is a more ravishingly beautiful creature in Paris, she wears the cap of invisibility."

Levignet let a cloud of smoke curl lazily from his mouth, and peered through its drifting haze at the lovely 'Toinette with the evident satisfaction of a connoisseur scrutinising a rare work of art. There was nothing of the voluptuary about this habitué of the boulevards and cafés, though his profession of faith was hedonistic. He remained so long silently contemplative that I felt a warranted impatience.

"Confound it, Levignet, do you think I go of curiosity with my verdancy? You excite liveliest anticipations and then, with the most voking sang-froid, cut one adrift and laps

dreams. Come to the rescue, man. Who is the lady?"

"You are right," said Levignet, with a slight laugh, and making a peculiarly graceful gesture with his left hand as if wafting a kiss to a distance. "When the wine comes, we shall drink to the health and long life of beauty. So you are interested, my dear Summerville? You were a dull dog did not that face stimulate your fancy. But that is a story will keep. My faith! it has been kept well enough these half dozen years. I know some ten or twenty garçons of the quill, any one of whom would give an ear for the details. Eh, well. You were asking about the affair of the bank-notes."

"I prefer to hear the story of your 'Toinette, if it is all the same to you, Monsieur Tantaliser."

Levignet raised his glass.

"It was very curious. Louis Napoleon was not by any means a fool, let me persuade you. No man is, for that matter, who knows how to get a throne—even that of France, which always invites the audacious. You know how the coup was effected. The chief aiders and abettors of Louis, besides the Duc de Mornay, were General Cornemuse and General St. Arnaud, without whom he scarcely could have succeeded. They, indeed, did the work for him. They kept him well reminded of this fact after he became Emperor, and made

such demands for money upon him, that it became a vexatious problem with him how to get rid of them and their exactions. He was not without fertility of a mischievous sort. I could tell you forty stories to prove that point. The great must be expedient, or the devil take them! "

" Which he is like to do in any event. "

" Eh? I do not follow you. But to our mutons. One morning the Emperor received my fine generals in a mood the most amiable. They had come in their usual fashion of cheerful insolence, accounting themselves in some manner the masters of the Empire, and were not a little disconcerted by the unexpected good-nature of their unwilling purse-bearer. Louis chatted and jested in the liveliest vein, and with the most cordial spirit imaginable took from his pocket and placed on the mantle-piece a joy-exciting pile of thousand-franc notes. He then diverted his guests with the most piquant anecdotes, and quite made them forget for a time the fact that they were there to bully him out of a snug part of his imperial profits. Laughing and joking in this way, Louis finally placed himself in front of the fireplace, with his back to the fire, and, in a happily chosen moment, whipped the bank-notes into his pocket, unobserved by either of the others.

" Then, pretending a necessity to go into the adjoining room, he excused himself for a moment

and retired. After an absence of perhaps ten minutes, he returned, seemingly somewhat vexed, and said in a brusque way:

“ ‘Pardon me, gentlemen; I quite forgot that you came on business. Let us attend to it. Here are some thousands of francs——’

“ The rascal turned to the mantelpiece, stopped short in his speech, looked, with an excellent counterfeit of surprise, where the notes were not, and then, in a comical way said:

“ ‘But I see you did not wait for me to give them to you. Well, did you divide them fairly?’

“ Was ever impudence greater? For my part, I wonder this superb charlatan’s effrontery did not save him from Sedan.

“ Cornemuse and St. Arnaud looked at each other in amazement, the one suspicious of the other instantly. How easily knaves fall out, my friend! Finally, Cornemuse stammered out:

“ ‘Sire, I hope you do not suspect that I——’

“ ‘Do you dare insinuate——’ interrupted St. Arnaud, hotly, and in the twinkle of an eye a pretty quarrel was delighting the soul of the imperial hypocrite, who affected to be greatly distressed by the question of honour so infelicitously raised. He took care that his words should increase the choler of the disputing gentlemen, however, and when they proposed to settle the matter at the sword’s point, there and then, he begged that they would

withdraw into the garden, where he hoped they might adjust their differences amicably.

"A scurvy trick might dupe as wise a person as you, friend Summerville, and those two gamesters with fortune were thoroughly taken in, I assure you. They bolted from the room to descend into the garden, but Cornemuse, the more precipitate of the two, was incautious enough to start first down the secluded stairway. The wily St. Arnaud perceived the advantage chance or his own discretion had given into his hands, and, not to be inappreciative of the partial attention, out with his sword and thrust the blade effectually into the back of the foolish Cornemuse."

"Cowardly enough," I remarked.

"Say, rather, strategic, my dear Summerville; an instance of the presence of mind that in all great crises discriminates the man of success from the man of failure. There was no one to be too critical whether the sword entered from the front or the rear, the name of duel covered up the crime of assassination, and Louis Napoleon was rid of one of his troublesome partners at no expense to himself."

"You put it felicitously, upon my word!"

"I am giving you facts, not indulging a fancy for heroics. Besides, it is all one to me how a scoundrel or a blackguard makes his exit from the comedy of life—whether by the spado of the bravo

or the nostrum of the quack. The important thing is that he makes his exit. This little episode of which I have been at pains to tell you with a dry throat, happened opportunely on the eve of the trouble in the Crimea. Cornemuse being out of the way, the simple question how to be quit of St. Arnaud was answered in the most satisfactory manner.

"He was commissioned to the war. Louis sent him in command to the Crimea, and there, presently, he died, of the cholera, it was officially reported—of poison, it was privately whispered. Thus was the triumvirate dissolved to the peace of the nephew of his uncle. *Eh, bien!* Again I say, Louis Napoleon was no fool; but 'tis a pity the back stairs or a cup of poison could not have availed against those cursed Prussians. Ah, garçon, the wine at last! Be quick; fill me a glass! I am perishing. Confound you, Summerville, for having me babble in this fashion with dessicated lips! I see where your eyes are feasting. Come on, then; here is to the lovely 'Toinette Beaudais—may time be damned if he impoverish her beauty!"

Whether deliberately or unconsciously, I could not say, but Levignet's gay tone was so loud that it attracted the attention of the couple at the table in the corner, and I saw their quick exchange of startled glances, the face of the man clouding angrily.

"They heard you," I protested, feeling somewhat uncomfortable.

"You alarm yourself, my dear friend. They are too much occupied the one with the other to be aware of us or our words."

Nevertheless, as he drank his wine in generous draughts, the gentleman arose from the table, bowed ceremoniously to the lady and came calmly toward us. Stopping a little in front of Levignet, he said, in politely modulated tones and with precise courtesy:

"It was your pleasure, monsieur, to call out the name of madame."

"Monsieur was attentive," answered Levignet, imperturbably. "It was my pleasure to drink the health of beauty."

"You are insolent, monsieur," said the other.

"You are candid, monsieur," responded Levignet.

"I have the honour to make request of your card," placing his own card, as he spoke, on the corner of the table.

"It is at your service," said Levignet, taking one from his case. "A moment, if you please."

He wrote with a pencil under his name, "Formerly sub-prefect of police," and handed the card to the stranger. "I shall take coffee at the first table in the café of the Grand Hotel precisely at ten o'clock in the morning."

"Thank you, monsieur." The gentleman bowed, and retired.

The lady, who was evidently much disturbed, had risen from the table, and advanced a little to meet her escort as he returned. The gentleman urged her to be seated again, but she declined, and he turned to summon the waiter. As he did so, 'Toinette took the card which he had kept in his hand, and as she read the superscription, gave a cry that, under other circumstances, I might have thought one of mingled pleasure and surprise. She held it to the view of her companion and I distinctly heard her say:

"Regardez, mon maril C'est Levignet, mon bienfaiteur!"

"Comment?"

Levignet heard, too, and smiled.

There was a whispered conference between the two, after which the gentleman, with the card extended in his hand, approached Levignet and said with dignity:

"I have the honour to return your card, monsieur. It will not be necessary to disturb you at coffee in the morning. Madame begs to assure you of her grateful remembrance."

"Since you permit me, monsieur," Levignet replied, "Madame has no more respectful admirer than your servant. The offence given was the most inadvertent, and monsieur and madame have my

profoundest regrets and apologies." Levignet arose as he spoke, and bowed in a way to include madame in the obeisance.

"It is I who apologise," said the other, bowing in his turn. A minute later the gentleman had feed the waiter and had left the café with "Toinette."

Levignet's regard followed them until they passed out the door, his lips wearing a peculiar, half pensive smile, his fingers playing with one end of his moustache. Though I burned with curious impatience for an explanation of a scene through which I had sat with anything but composed emotions, I did not disturb the reverie of my friend, but sipped my wine in silence as the waiter served the supper.

After a time he roused himself and, smiling upon me, said:

"You make no comment, Summerville."

"My dear Levignet," I answered, "my ears are at your service."

"Very well. When we come to our cigars, I shall puncture them with a strange tale."

"I see you are resolved to give me an indigestion."

"My dear young friend, philosophy is an excellent aperient. You shall be taught patience."

There was not too much to eat, but the meal was interminable. Finally, I exclaimed:

"Confound it, Levignet! I shall go back to the opera. It is less a trial than you are, for there, at least, I know what is coming."

"And therefore you are not in the least piqued to interest. But have at you! Here is a story known to but four people on earth, Monsieur le Baron de Noel, the polite gentleman whose card I have; 'Toinette, the beautiful lady who has the honour to be the Baron's wife; an interesting female Mephisto of the social world; and your most obliging friend, who is about to admit you to another of the professional confidences of which you have proved yourself deserving in the years of our acquaintance."

He took a mouthful of fish.

"Ah! when it comes to sole, one must really give the first place to the Café Margery. But this is very good."

I ventured no opinion, and, after a time, he gave his moustache the preparatory twirl for which I was waiting.

"I must inform you, my dear Summerville, that from the day I left the University, about half educated, though I got a sheepskin, I have been a fellow of eccentric impulses. My father had the thoughtful care to make a fortune in chocolate, and was considerate enough to die and leave me rich before I had become a patron of the barbers. It had been his desire that I take up either the law or

medicine, but, as he did not wait to see me placed, I thought it rather a waste of energies to adopt a troublesome profession, since I already had the substantial rewards of industry, and recognised no necessity to struggle for an increase of that of which I possessed more than I could spend decently in an average lifetime. But I was of an experimental and inquisitive mind, and there were certain occupations that offered me diversion without imposing upon me any tedious grind by way of preparation. I used to haunt the studios of artists and, fascinated by the studies of life which chiefly engaged the young painters, I became a dauber in oils, a spoiler of canvas. I might have achieved a famous success had that been the day of our impressionists, for, to tell you the truth, nothing was more difficult than to determine whether my painting was intended to represent a tranquil landscape or a storm at sea, a revel of fairies or the feeding of sheep. I persevered, however, with the satisfaction of an enthusiast until the rascally artists held a solemn convocation, very ceremoniously presented me with an engraved pewter medal, and, in a series of speeches that might have been inspired by a Raphael, graduated me from their studios and locked the doors against me, so that the world at large should have the benefit of my genius.—‘Come to Hecuba’? What the deuce do you mean by bidding me ‘come to Hecuba’? Another name

for 'Toinette? *Eh, bien!* I choose my own road to a destination. If you can get to 'Toinette without me, *bon voyage*. I shall smoke my cigar in peace."

The rogue laughed at my despairing gesture, filled my glass again, and said:

"You nervous Americans! One must humour you even at the sacrifice of art. It is deplorable. Well, from masterpieces of art I turned to the creation of masterpieces in various fields of endeavour. I have been everything and done everything, from writing verse to dissecting a cadaver; and, finally, I became an editor, with a view to solidifying the Third Republic—or undermining it, as the case might be. This work was very agreeable to me, as it brought me into communication with all sorts and classes of people, and gave me an acquaintance with my fellow mortals that quite disturbed my theology. I grew to be a veritable Mephisto with benevolent tendencies. Not by any means a contradiction, my dear boy. Every intelligent man of the world is a curious composite of devil and saint. Experience will show you yourself in that light. Well, through my influence as an editor and in pursuit of a caprice, I secured an appointment to the secret service police, with the exceptional privileges and authorities of a sub-prefect. I began to cherish the notion that I should beat Gaboriau at his own game and actually went so far toward it as to gather material for a novel that you may write,

if you will. As for me, I have discovered that fact is so much more strange and unreal than fiction as to make fools of the novelists. *Allons donc.*

"This was my situation the night, or rather the morning of November 12th, 1887. I had been busied at the office of the paper later than usual, and did not close my desk until about one o'clock. It was a beautiful clear night, with the stars thick as spray, but the air was rather chilly. I had no great distance to go, and instead of calling a cab decided to walk, to throw off the oppressiveness of the beastly office and get myself into a wholesome frame of mind and body for a sleep. Buttoning my overcoat across my breast, lighting a cigar, and thrusting my hands well down into my side pockets, I started off at a brisk pace. My thoughts were occupied with some features of a recent case which was puzzling the police, when I was startled from my reflections by a woman, thinly clad, with a shawl drawn about her head and shoulders, who came from a doorway in the rue de l'Université and grasped me by the arm, imploring me to serve her.

" 'What do you want?' I asked.

" 'Oh, sir, in the name of Heaven, go for a doctor, and bid him come at once! I will wait for you at the open door.'

" 'What shall I say is the matter?'

" 'An accident. I can't give you the particulars, but delay may be fatal.'

"A few doors below, on a cross street, lived one of the most eminent physicians of Paris, and, with more interest that I could account for to myself, I told the woman to get within doors, and hastened to fetch the doctor. I ran most of the distance along the empty, desolate, dimly lighted streets, until I reached the residence of Dr. Ribault. I pulled the bell with unnecessary violence, and gave it a second and third pull before it was possible anyone should respond to the first call. Very promptly, an upper window was raised, and a voice demanded:

" 'Who is there? '

" 'Is that Dr. Ribault? '

" 'Yes. What do you want of him? '

" 'A case of life and death just around the corner. No time to be lost.'

" 'I will be with you directly,' said he grumblingly, and the window was roughly closed.

"It seemed a devil of a time before the doctor appeared, but I relieved my impatience with all sorts of fanciful conjectures, my experience of police cases leading me to believe there was something mysterious, or at least sensational in the affair. When, therefore, Dr. Ribault opened his door and joined me somewhat ungraciously, I had made up my mind to go with him to the house, instead of giving him the number and continuing on my way home.

"I made myself known to the doctor, and, expressing my opinion that the case was something out of the common run, asked permission to accompany him. He readily enough consented, and within ten minutes we were at the door where the woman waited.

"She half blocked the entrance as we came up, and said, pantingly, pointing at me:

" 'But this gentleman——'

" 'Is all right,' interrupted the doctor. 'Where is the patient?'

"The woman, who, needlessly explained that her name was Madame Arnot, and that she let rooms to lodgers, was in a state of morbid excitement, talked volubly but incoherently, and, in an aimless fashion, as if not conscious of what she was doing, ushered us into a parlour or reception room, and begged us to sit down, evidently reluctant to take us at once to the victim of the accident.

"All this was plainly annoying to Dr. Ribault, who brusquely demanded to know what all she was saying had to do with a case that required his attention so urgently. Mme. Arnot told us as best she could, with many sobs and superfluous words, what had caused her fright. She was a light sleeper, she said, and had been awakened by a noise as of a heavy body falling on the floor of the room just above her own. While she was wondering, half sleepily, what had disturbed her, an upper

door slammed and she heard light footsteps hurrying down the stairs. She sprang from her bed and rushed into the hall just in time to see the front door open and the figure of a woman pass out into the darkness. She ran forward, looked out the door, which had been left open, and dimly descried a swiftly moving figure which passed under the feeble gaslight and disappeared. Filled with a numbing fear, she returned into the house, struggled upstairs, entered the room in which she had heard the noise, 'And there,' she exclaimed hysterically, 'I saw such a sight as made my blood freeze in my veins—a man lying dead, upon the floor. Oh, dear doctor, I couldn't go near it, and ran down the stairs and crouched in the open door scared almost to death, till this gentleman came by.'

"'Show me the way!' ordered the doctor, rising.

Madame Arnot rose tremblingly.

"'Who is this man?' asked the doctor, as we started up the stairs.

"'M. Jules Martin. He came here six months ago to look for rooms. He ended by renting the house, and I turned off my other lodgers. A week later he brought a lady here, and introduced her as his wife. She was very pretty and very young, much too young for him, I thought—but that is all I know of them.'

"The conversation had been conducted in strained whispers, and we were now halfway up the stairs. When we reached the landing Mme. Arnot turned to the left, and, stopping before the second door, which she did not offer to open, said in a low whisper:

" 'This is the room.'

"We went in quietly, and turned on the gas to full blaze. Lying face downward on the floor, in his night robe, was the body of a man. The doctor touched him and, in the act of turning him over, said composedly:

" 'Quite dead.'

"But when the light fell strong on the pale, dark-bearded face of the dead man, the doctor sprang back, startled, even terrified, and exclaimed excitedly:

" 'My God! It is Judge Chartier! My old friend Chartier! ' "

III

I KNEW Judge Chartier by reputation as one of the wealthiest and most distinguished members of the bar, and often had seen him in public. I knew also that his daughter was an accomplished young lady, a social favourite, remarkable for her benevolence, and that his son occupied a responsible position under the government.

“While these thoughts were flashing through my mind, Dr. Ribault, deeply affected, had knelt beside the body of his friend, clutching a wrist in the vain hope to feel some slight fluttering of the pulse, bending his ear against the dead man’s breast, intently listening for the muffled sound of a yet throbbing heart. As he lifted his head and drew back his hand from the breast of his dead friend, I heard him mutter in an awed whisper the one word ‘Murdered!’

“Then, rising quickly, he turned to me with pale face and with gleaming eyes, said brusquely and with evident anxiety to prevent questions:

“‘It is a case of heart disease. Help me lift him onto the bed.’

“We stooped to raise the body, which we bore to the bed with some difficulty, for Judge Chartier had been a man of exceptional stature. As we

straightened out the yet lax limbs, I pointed to a single spot of blood on the soft bosom of the night robe, and said quietly:

“ ‘Excuse me, doctor, is this an indication of heart disease?’

“He glanced where I pointed, and exclaimed eagerly, as if to sweep away what doubt I had:

“ ‘That did not come from him. He has not bled.’

“He drew a sheet up over the body, and then addressed me imploringly:

“ ‘We must get him secretly and quickly to his home. There must be no publicity—no scandal. A carriage must be brought, and we will dress him and take him to the house. We can support him between us, so the cabman will suspect nothing, except that he is ill. Go, I entreat you, to get a carriage.’

“He was pushing me toward the door as he spoke thus, his words coming fast, with scarcely a pause between them.

“Resisting him respectfully, but firmly I said:

“ ‘I will do as you say, doctor, but first I must be satisfied. I am an editor, and owe some duty to my paper. But I am also a sub-prefect, and owe something to my profession. I cannot accept your explanation that this is a case of heart disease. It is either murder or suicide. I must see what that spot of blood means.’

"Dr. Ribault remonstrated with me, angrily, pleadingly, but when he found me resolved to penetrate the mystery, he went abruptly to the bed, threw back the sheet, held open the shirt, and said:

" 'Look, then!'

"I was at his side instantly, and, looking on the exposed breast of the dead man, saw the glitter of a triangular group of golden spear heads to a tiny instrument fixed in the breast directly over the seat of the heart. I comprehended at once. It was the head of one of those formidable pins which women make use of to keep their hats in place. Less than half an inch of the pin was visible beneath the fantastic head, the main length being buried in the heart of the dead man. It had been driven home with such force and precision that not a drop of blood had escaped outwardly. I was more startled by this than I would have been by the sight of a gaping knife-wound.

" 'Murdered!' I exclaimed. 'But how do you account for the drop of blood here?'

" 'That came from the hand of the person who committed the murder. His hand was evidently cut by these prongs, so great was the resistance even to the point of the needle-like pin.'

"I was rather jealous of his detective acuteness, and remarked that it must have been a woman of exceptional strength and sang-froid to have managed it so adroitly.

“ ‘It was not done by a woman,’ he said insistently. ‘It is a man’s scarf-pin.’

“ ‘Nonsense, doctor! It is a woman’s hat pin. This is the work of a woman. Besides, it was a woman who fled from the house.’

“ ‘True. I had forgotten,’ he assented, reluctantly; then, with sudden earnestness, he pleaded in behalf of his dead friend’s family that I would agree with him to keep the affair secret for a time.

“ After some resistance, sentiment and benevolence contending against my professional instincts and theories of justice, I made a conditional promise to keep this night’s affair a profound secret for the present, to let it be thought that Judge Chartier had died of heart disease at his own home, after having been attacked at the residence of his intimate friend, Doctor Ribault. Fortunately for the success of this arrangement, Dr. Ribault was a widower, living alone with an elderly housekeeper and a man-servant who slept over the stables.

“ This plan decided upon, Dr. Ribault carefully drew the long pin from the breast of the dead man, the consequent flow of blood being very slight, skillfully dressed the wound, which was merely a puncture not more than the eighteenth part of an inch in diameter, and so ingeniously closed it in with a bit of wax that other eyes than ours could not detect the place.

“ Within a few minutes we had clothed the body

in the street suit of the Judge, and I went to get a carriage. At the foot of the stairs I found Mme. Arnot, crouching expectantly.

" 'Well?' she asked eagerly, yet in a frightened tone of voice.

" 'It is all right,' I answered. 'M. Martin had an attack of heart disease, but he is not yet dead, and may be saved. It would be well for you, however, to say nothing about this affair, or you may find yourself in an unpleasant predicament with the police.'

" 'Thank God!' exclaimed the woman, wholly restored to confidence; 'I thought there had been a murder. You may be sure I know how to keep my own counsel.'

" Just as I was going out the door, the doctor called me from the head of the stairs. I returned to him.

" 'You had better get my private carriage,' he whispered. 'My man, Jacques, is a trusty fellow. Rouse him and order him to harness the horses and come at once.'

" This simplified matters, and I followed instructions.

" In less than an hour the body of Judge Chartier lay on a sofa in the library of his Avenue d'Antin residence, with the stricken family gathered in loving sorrow about it.

" The afternoon papers of the next day and the

morning papers of the day following contained long and eulogistic obituary notices lamenting the sudden, but peaceful death of the highly esteemed, exemplary Judge Chartier, who was duly committed to the care of the family vault with all the sanctity befitting the end of a noble career."

Levignet smiled, made a deprecatory movement of his shoulder and, refilling my glass, exclaimed: "*V'la!*" as if he had come to the end of his story.

"But what has that to do with 'Toinette?' " I demanded with some irritation.

"'Toinette! I uncovered to you one of the most piquant of the mysteries of Paris, and your vagrant mind is all the time in chase of a pretty woman's phantom! Humph! I thought you were an amateur of social lunacies. Shall I help you to an artichoke? You will find the sauce exquisite. If you take the trouble to learn for what dish each restaurant is excellent, you may dine to perfection in Paris. But it is a mistake to suppose that all the virtues of the cuisine have been appropriated to the establishments most remarkable for their charges. There is, presumably, an affinity between price and quality, but——"

"Confound it, Levignet! "

"Oh, my dear Summerville, you are tempestive! Ah, well; placidity is temperamental, or impossible, Dr. Ribault assures me. I yield to your infirmity. The doctor and I, as you may suppose, became

very good comrades. We often dined or breakfasted together at appointed places, and naturally the adventure which had made us acquainted was never quite ignored in our conversation. The two main questions—who was the woman? and, what was the motive of her apparently vindictive crime?—continued to baffle our guardedly conducted investigations. We had many theories, and probably we hit upon exact facts with some of them, but we could arrive at nothing tangible. From Mme. Arnot we got a vague and rather too general description of ‘Mme. Martin,’ and concluded that she was a well-bred, refined young lady—Mme. Arnot was sure she was not more than nineteen years old—who might have come from any of a hundred families within the barriers of this city of beautiful women. Our one clue, the jewelled and tricuspid hat-pin, was rather more vexatious than helpful, as I developed a mania for taking it to jewellers to have its counterpart made, without succeeding in finding anyone who could point to its maker.

“Six months, twelve months, eighteen months, and no developments. I had come to regard myself as *particeps criminis* by this time, and rather enjoyed the situation—though the doctor was very far from seeing it in a humorous light. He continually excused himself by declaring that he had discharged a sacred duty to friendship in conceal-

ing the fact that his boyhood and manhood 'pal,' as you say, had finished in a shameful death; but he was troubled by compunctions of conscience, and had I belonged to the vulgarly acquisitive class of materialists, I might have preyed upon his fears to half the extent of his fortune. Finally, we dismissed the subject from our conversations, deciding to leave the discovery of the assassin to chance. And here let me say that 'Chance' is far the best detective the government has in its service. Vidocqs are marvellous fellows in fiction, where the game is all in the hands of the novelist; but in practical criminality, in ninety-nine detective cases out of a hundred, circumstances would make fools of the cleverest detectives, did not 'Chance' or a 'peacher' intervene. Those of us who have been much behind the scenes know how small a part mere astuteness or deductive intelligence plays in clearing up a 'mystery' without the aid of 'Chance' or the 'Informer.' A clever man, of course, knows how to eliminate the adventitious elements when he has elaborated his problem, and may give the appearance of sagacity to what was nothing more than obedience to specific direction. However, if the tricks of trade in all its ramifications were known, some very distinguished figures in history would topple from their pedestals.

"At the end of two years I had come to the conclusion that the affair of the rue de l'Université

had taken its place among the impenetrable mysteries that are far more numerous in criminal annals than the confiding public remotely suspects.

"Having been absurd enough to accept a seat in the Chamber of Deputies, I became more or less occupied with the foolish or knavish projects of political factions, and gradually lost touch with the fascinating army of criminals with which professional duties had made me familiar. I confess that I was rather annoyed by the futile obligations of my rôle as deputy, which were impairing my zest for what is really the most captivating of intellectual pursuits—the investigation of social derelictism, if I may employ the word. It was not without a sense of pleasure then that I saw shuffle into my editorial room one day perhaps the most thoroughly disreputable of the incorrigible thieves whose pictures enrich the galleries of our prefecture. He paused expectantly inside the door, a smile, half impudent, half deferential, distorting his thin, vulpine face.

"*'Bon jour, M'sieu' Levignet.'*

"*'Ah! How do you do, Benoist?'* I inquired cheerily, swinging my chair around to face him. *'What brings you here? Have you a friend whom you wish to honour with an introduction to justice?'*

"No, m'sieu', he answered with an appreciative grin, at the same time unfolding a slip of paper

clumsily torn from a newspaper. 'I come in the way of business. It is about this.'

"He handed me the slip, which proved to be an advertisement from my own paper offering a reward for the return of a valuable ring taken from a residence in a fashionable part of the city, there being the usual guaranty of no questions asked.

" 'Oh! One of your enterprises, eh, Benoist?'

" 'No, truly, m'sieu'. The credit belongs to a friend of mine, but he is modest. The advertisement says to leave the ring at the *Clarion* office, and name reward. I know you for the right sort, m'sieu'. I can trust you. Here is the "shiner,"' saying which, he produced the ring, a very handsome one, which answered to the description.

" 'And how much value do you set on your honesty, Benoist?'

" 'Two hundred francs, m'sieu'.'

"A whim, or a revival of instinct, induced me to undertake the enterprise. I inquired in the business office, learned that a reward up to four hundred francs had been arranged for, gave Benoist the two hundred claimed, took the address of the advertiser and determined to deliver the ring myself. For the life of me I could have given no reason for an undertaking that promised nothing more interesting than the return of a bauble to a woman who might prove to be as ugly as the furies and as fat as the pantomime dowager. Caprice is the hand-

maiden of Destiny, my dear Summerville. Blindly followed, she is wiser than a council of judges. I have made her my mistress for forty years and my friends think me the luckiest man in Paris.

"After dinner that evening, the ring snugly stowed in my silk porte-monnaie, I drove to the residence indicated, and was duly ushered into a spacious library, the footman being informed that I did not come as one of the guests who already thronged the salon. Presently, the master of the house, the General de Francault, whom I knew very well by sight, came into the room. Though his carriage was of that painfully erect character enforced by military tradition, his countenance was benignant and his manner affable. He greeted me graciously, and waited politely for me to state the object of my call. I told him promptly that I came to restore the ring stolen from his house. He elevated his eyebrows, curiously surveyed me as if I might have been the thief in proper person, smiled in a reassured way and glanced dubiously at the ring.

" 'I am not sure that I recognise it,' he said. 'The ring was stolen with some other trinkets that belonged to my niece. I must call her to identify the property.'

"He rang a bell and bade the servant who entered to 'request M'lle Antoinette to come here.'

"Before I had ended explaining how the ring

came into my possession, a beautiful young lady, not above twenty, I judged, entered the room smilingly, with a 'Yes, uncle?'

"I shall not offer to describe her, as I find I am suspected of a tendency to over-elaborate the charms of women who please me; and I admit that my equanimity is somewhat easily disturbed by them. I may be permitted to say, however, that in a face of extraordinary sweetness there was a dash of determined worldliness that enchanted me. To my palate the most deliciously delicate meat in the world is that of a fresh young langouste, as they serve it at the Café d'Ammononville, but I never eat it without a sprinkling of red pepper. Taste, Summerville, is the epitome of the cardinal virtues, and differences in taste are signs of moral no less than of aesthetic separation; so I will not argue that it requires a touch of the devil to clarify a saint, for we might not agree. You have, as yet, a somewhat contracted view of the significance of life. But you would have raved over the young lady.

" 'Toinette,' said the General, 'this gentleman, M. Levignet, has brought a ring which he thinks is the one stolen from you.'

" 'Oh, let me see!' she exclaimed, with an eagerness that was unmistakable, though, strangely enough, it gave no hint of pleasure, and the smile quite disappeared from her lips, but was forced

back again with a shadow of bitterness in it. And there was something in her eyes, too, that belied the gaiety of her speech.

“‘It is mine!’ she declared at the first glance, even before I had given it into her hands. ‘I had quite despaired of seeing it again. However did you come by it, M. Levignet?’

“I repeated to her what I had already said to the General, though you cannot blame me if I added a few phrases rather more appropriate in a narrative to a vivaciously agreeable young lady than in a matter-of-fact statement to a grizzled old dog of war.

“The General was for immediate reimbursement of the two hundred francs, evidently mistaking my offer to call at a more opportune time for a deliberate attempt to extend the acquaintance. He excused himself to fetch the money. In his absence Mademoiselle Antoinette talked so frankly and wittily, and yet with such an undercurrent of conflicting emotion that my speculative fancies were roused to the keenest pitch of enjoyment. She was a new type. As a connoisseur in character, I perceived in her elements of such positive and yet conflicting qualities, that I found myself speculating upon the different results circumstances could produce out of such material. She was capable of being the Ruth of the Hebrews, or the Medea of Colchis; Judith or Helen; Jezebel or Niobe; martyr

or avenger. But as an output of our sterilising, unifying system of social civilisation, she was merely an exceptionally charming young lady, with remarkable underlying possibilities. I wondered what she might have been had her environment been sordid, poverty-cursed and criminal. You will not abuse my meaning when I say that I felt a delight in her presence such as I had never experienced in the company of any other woman. If you can imagine a woman of modesty so simple that it enforces your reserve, and yet of a piquancy that challenges your levity, you may understand something of the influence 'Toinette exercised over me in our first brief interview.

"It happened that my attention was attracted by a portrait in which I detected resemblance to Mademoiselle. As the light was too imperfect to permit of a clear view of the features, 'Toinette graciously reached to turn on the gas, and, in doing so, caught the lace of her sleeve in the gold work of an ornamental bracket. I stepped forward, with some playful remark, to disengage her arm; and, as I took hold of the lace, she turned her hand coquettishly, as if supplicating release, the glare of the light falling full on her palm. I was in the Chamber when an anarchist's bomb exploded in our midst, but I was not nearly so much startled by that incident as I was by the sight in her hand of a uniform three-pointed mark, showing through

the cuticle of the palm like a faint red tattoo. Psychic forces are as subtle and incomprehensible as electricity. They rush upon your intelligence with sudden clarification, and you know in an instant facts to which you could never attain by reasoning processes.

"I grasped her hand, rudely, perhaps, professional zeal getting the better of me, and, holding the palm sharply to the light, exclaimed exultingly, 'At last!'

"'What do you mean!' she demanded indignantly, at the same time snatching her hand from my grasp with a violence that tore the lace of her sleeve and dislodged a vase, that fell from the bracket and crashed against the tessellated flooring.

"I bowed, smiling cynically.

"'Ah, mademoiselle, conceive my satisfaction in seeing a cryptograph for which I have searched despairingly for the better part of two years!'

"'What do you mean?' she repeated angrily, her eyes flashing into mine a defiance the bravado of which I easily discerned and admired. A grey tinge came into her face that made its beauty haggard, but her head was proudly borne, and I flattered myself that a battle royal was impending. There is an indefinable pleasure and sense of triumph in the mental play that is to entrap a shrewd, clever, well-fortified suspect into an in-

evitable confession of guilt. No other form of excitement is equal to it. I regarded her for some moments with a calmly mocking and assured smile that a little disconcerted her resolution and betrayed her into an indiscreet question.

“ ‘For whom do you take me?’

“With as even a tone as if she had asked me the time of day, I answered, complacently twisting my moustache and looking her fixedly but not at all threateningly in the eyes:

“ ‘For the assassin of Judge Chartier, mademoiselle.’

“I was never so disappointed with the effect of a shot in my life. Her manner changed instantly. Though she was undoubtedly prepared for my accusation, the directness of it, the quiet, convinced simplicity of my speech, did not square with the order of attack for which she had arranged a defence. She looked at me dumbly for a moment, the defiant look fading from her eyes, then, suddenly covering her face with her hands, she sank down at my feet, moaning:

“ ‘So I am. Do with me what you will.’

“I was taken aback. She was not playing the rôle I had assigned her, and I was irritated by the transition. Candidly, I rather admire a resolute, unflinching criminal bent on baffling his accusers. It arouses your ingenuity, it calls into exercise all your resources of craft and subtlety, and if you come off

the victor, it is a smart addition to the feathers in your cap. But the sudden abandonment of the defensive position and an unconditional surrender at the first fire offends one's self-love. It places an expert strategist at a provoking disadvantage; especially when that strategist is, like me, cursed with a constitutional inability to coördinate beauty with criminal responsibility. One of the most pernicious tenets to which politics ever committed outraged society is the ineptitude that kings can do no wrong. But I am helplessly committed to the equally fantastic theory that beauty is its own absolution from the gravamen of criminal mischance. I use the word 'mischance' advisedly, for, according to my reasoning, beauty errs only through accident, betrayal or temporary insanity produced by shock, and is, therefore, never really culpable. Generally speaking, beauty is the expression of that sane moral balance to which society owes its perpetuity. You may think this mere sophism, or worse; to my mind it is the fundamental principle of human progress, and we shall be masquerading savages until the era of its universal adoption.

"It need not surprise you, then, that, dismissing my professional chagrin, I stooped in compassionate tenderness and lifted the unhappy creature to her feet.

" 'Mademoiselle,' I said consolingly, 'I was perfectly willing, I may say eager, to play my wits

against your own had you persisted in an effort to deceive me. But the manner in which you have admitted your guilt so entirely persuades me of your innocence that I am ready to undertake your defence against yourself.'

"These words bewildered her, she being so wholly ignorant of my rational methods.

" 'In God's name, do not mock me. If you intend to hand me over to justice, I will go with you. Come; let us go now, before my uncle returns. Let there be no scene.'

" 'There shall be no scene, mademoiselle. I shall not take you with me. Chance, it is true, has put you in my power; but your secret is safe between us, unless you fail to convince me that my theory of the affair of the rue de l'Université is the correct one. We are liable to interruption at any moment by the return of your uncle, so that I have no opportunity now to question you. Tomorrow afternoon, at two o'clock, I shall expect you in my cabinet at the *Clarion* office. Will you come?'

" 'Oh, yes, monsieur; I will come.'

" 'I know the particulars of the tragedy. It was I who connived with Dr. Ribault to give the death of Judge Chartier the character of a natural one. My analysis of the circumstances led me to a feeling of sympathy with the unknown woman who——

“ ‘ Oh, monsieur ! ’

“ ‘ I only wish to assure you that my judgment does not utterly condemn you, but recognises the possibility of extenuating facts. You will do well to be straightforward with me. You probably have no wish to evade me—but if the idea should come to you, dismiss it. The niece of General de Francault would find evasion difficult.’

“ ‘ I understand, monsieur. I will come to you at two o’clock to-morrow, or——’

“ She was interrupted by the voice of the General speaking outside the door, and, without completing the sentence or taking leave of me, she ran across the room and disappeared through the curtains of a doorway opposite to the one through which the General entered.

“ After some trivial talk with the General, in the course of which he paid me the two hundred francs and thanked me for my trouble, coupling the remark with some reference of a flattering sort to one of my speeches in the Chamber, I said my adieu and retired.”

IV

I WENT directly to the house of Dr. Ribault, and luckily found the old fellow in.

“ ‘What would you say,’ I asked abruptly, ‘if I were to tell you that I am able to lay hands on the owner of the hat-pin?’ ”

“ He sank back into a chair, his face as devoid of colour as his shirt-front.

“ ‘Good Heaven! Levignet, why do you alarm me in that fashion?’ ”

“ ‘I have found her.’ ”

“ ‘Found whom?’ ”

“ ‘I have told you—the owner of the hat-pin.’ ”

“ ‘You are jesting, Levignet.’ ”

“ ‘Then why are you trembling?’ ”

“ ‘You—you haven’t seen her?’ ”

“ ‘Not half an hour ago.’ ”

“ ‘And she is under arrest?’ ”

“ ‘Not yet.’ ”

“ He rose from his chair and came to clutch me by the arm as he said, half pleadingly, half insistently:

“ ‘There must be no arrest. There must be no raking up of the ashes of my dead friend to scatter them to the winds of infamy.’ ”

“ ‘ And the law?—justice? ’

“ ‘ Law! Justice! Terms—expedients. They are for the purpose of guarding the honour of society, not for its degradation. We put them both aside when more is to be lost than gained by appealing to them. If you bring an unknown assassin before a tribunal where he can be condemned only by disgracing a noble family and by defaming the respected dead, what is the benefit to society? Law becomes a mockery and justice an outrage, within such circumstances! ’

“ ‘ And yet, by concealing the facts and shielding the criminal, you and I, my dear Doctor Ribault, become accessories to the crime, and are equally guilty with its perpetrator! I am not a saint, but——’

“ ‘ Don’t talk rubbish, Levignet. Don’t try to frighten me with childish bugaboos! That is one of the traps the lawyers set to catch fools. I tell you I will not have disgrace brought on that family! ’

“ ‘ But surely you would not have the assassin of your friend——’

“ ‘ Judge Chartier is beyond the influence of the living, good or evil; but his wife, whom I esteem, Mademoiselle Chartier, whom I love, and Gaston Chartier, a noble young man just taking his place in the world, shall not be crushed by a blow that would bring no good to anyone. A thousand times

greater harm will be done by sending to the guillotine a woman who may have been terribly wronged, than would result from the immunity of the assassin.'

" 'Your views are nearly in accord with my own, my dear doctor, for I have seen and formed a favourable opinion of the young woman. But we must proceed rationally. Many things are to be considered. Your sentimental interest in the family of your old friend is honourable to you; just as I think my sympathy with the distress of a fascinating girl is creditable to me. Each of us has a self-satisfying reason for letting the girl go free, but the reasoning would not seem so cogent from a different view-point; that is to say, you would not regard my susceptibility to beauty as a justification of my neglect of official duty; and as an officer of the law, I can hardly admit that your private devotion to the Chartiers should blind you to the importance of bringing a criminal to justice.'

" 'What! do you tell me seriously that you mean to arrest the girl?'

" 'I certainly mean to probe the matter; but as for arrest—well, that will depend upon the extent to which you can persuade me that her conduct——'

" 'Mark me! if you make this affair public, I will kill you!'

"The interruption was like a bolt from a cata-

pult. My mood had been rather bantering than earnest, and here of a sudden was the doctor glaring at me, his face distorted, fists clenched, arms rigidly at his side, lips quivering, nostrils dilating—all the symptoms, in short, of a fine frenzy! If I had loved him less, I should have laughed, but he is an admirable fellow, and I was above insulting him. After my momentary astonishment, I said, with as much complacency as my inclination to laugh permitted:

“‘My dear doctor, I have often been cautioned in that way, but I am so entirely a child of caprice that I cannot profit by warnings. I am never so irresistibly led by it as when a personal danger lies in the way. Therefore, it would be folly for me to promise to keep silence. Whether I do or not will depend entirely upon my state of mind at 2:30 o'clock to-morrow afternoon, when I have interviewed the young lady. I have disturbed you. Pardon me. Good night.’

“I had taken up my hat and stick as I spoke, and, with a careless nod of the head toward him, turned to go. But he hurried to me, grasped my arm, and, his anger turned to supplication, said:

“‘Levignet! my dear Levignet, wait! wait! I was wrong. I was not myself. Think of it! We have been the closest possible friends these two years. You like me; you have said it. Well, pity me. Let this woman go!’

“ ‘What! you know her, then?’

“ ‘Oh, no—no—no. I know nothing of her—I care nothing for her—I have not even asked you for her name. If you demand a reason, I’ll give you one you cannot resist, if there is a heart in your breast.’

“ ‘My dear Ribault, you are trembling. You are in tears. Be composed. Sit down. Now, then; what is it? You’ll find that I know how to be a friend.’

“ ‘Then prove your friendship and keep Elise—Mademoiselle Chartier free from the shame and humiliation of such a scandal!’

“ ‘The truth flashed on me in an instant. I felt provoked with myself, as I took a swift retrospect of our intimate conversations, that I had not divined it earlier in our acquaintance. I looked compassionately at him as he sat bowed down, his hands covering his face. I laid my hand gently on his shoulder.

“ ‘Then Mademoiselle Chartier is——’

“ ‘My daughter.’

“ ‘I passed my hand lightly over his head, stroking his hair, then, without a word, left him alone.

“ ‘How the stars crowded one another in the blue-black sky that night! As I looked at them, I had a fancy to see their sheen in the water. Any-one less obedient to caprice than I would have laughed the notion into the limbo of mooning non-

sense and marched off energetically to his club. I strolled down to the quays. My dear Summer-ville, dismiss from your mind forever the doubt that Chance is a divinity. It is, as I have told you, the greatest arbiter and guide of human conduct. The man who is entirely obedient to it is the man who successfully fulfills his destiny. The only failures in life result from the opposition of self-will to the decrees of Chance. Don't be mistaken in this. It is a truth.

"The quays were deserted. After wandering idly along the river for some distance, I leaned over a parapet to enjoy the spectacle. There is the starved soul of a neglected poet imprisoned somewhere beneath my diaphragm that sometimes troubles me with its struggles to get free. At such times my physical energy gives way to languor, and I remain indefinitely a prey to inaction. I don't know how long I dozed over the parapet, but I was roused from my reverie by the regular plash of oars in the water, and I saw a boat being rowed to the shore line just below me. It was an effective bit of life in the still darkness of the river, lighted only by the star-spray, and I thought how pleasant it would be to drift down with the current to the quay near to my own house. Caprice again, my friend, but I acted on it. Making myself known to the boatman, I very readily concluded a bargain with him for the use of his boat, for which he was

to call the next morning. I rowed into the middle of the stream, and there shipping my oars, I let the boat drift, boyishly jubilant in the sensation of my silly romance. Everything was enchanting; the frolic of the ripples with the massive piers of the bridges; the swaying of barges at their moorings; the distant rattle of a cab over the cobbles; the blinking and disappearing lights in the houses; the fixed but every way diverging line of the street lamps; the slim finger of the spire elegantly softening the grim bulk of Notre Dame; the swoop and swift circling of the bats; the boom of the passing hour from the belfries; even the black, unbroken wall of the morgue, against which the waters beat with a heavy swash, lent a complementary touch to the serene peace of the midnight.

"My boat had stolen towards the right bank and I was gliding among the shadows from the trees that overhang the quay below the Pont Neuf, when I heard a splash ahead of me, as if someone had plunged from a floating boat-pier. I was alert in an instant, and grasped my oars. I rowed in the direction of the sound, and saw the great circles that the star-shine begemmed widening toward the further shore. I saw an object rise a boat-length ahead of me, one hand reaching up to clutch at the yielding air, and almost instantly disappear again. A sweep of the oars brought me to the spot.

" You have seen me in the water. I know something about it. I might have a breast-load of life-saving medals if I had not had a prejudice against wearing them. A dive, a little groping about, and the thing is done. It is child's play, once you have caught the knack of it. I make no more virtue of such a performance than I do of peeling an orange properly. Some skill is required, however, to get into a boat while you cling to the half-drowned, fully-dressed body of a grown woman; but it is nothing compared with climbing a breast-work in the face of a rifle-volley, and he who has done one may easily manage the other.

" As I got again into the boat with my burden, a man called from the bank :

" ' What's the matter out there ? ' "

" I was about to explain when an opening in the trees let the street light fall rather freely on the upturned face of——"

" ' Toinette ! ' " I exclaimed.

" Exactly," assented Levignet, without seeming to recognise my astuteness. " I answered the fellow on the bank cheerily, assuring him that I had been asleep and tumbled from the boat, but that the plunge had driven the wine from my head. He had the ill-nature to be dissatisfied with the answer, and I saw that the only way to prevent a hubbub to fetch the police down on me was to conciliate the blackguard. I rowed to the boat landing and

invited the fellow into the boat. I let him hear the rattle of some gold pieces, as I said to him:

“ ‘My good fellow, to tell you the truth, I have quarrelled with my mistress. In a fit of jealousy, which you can understand, she threw herself overboard. You shall help me to revive her, and when we have got her into a carriage, which you will call for me, you will be richer by two large pieces of gold.’

“The rascal was not quite a fool.

“ ‘It’s all one to me, m’sieu’,’ he said. ‘Save her or drown her; I’m your man for the forty francs—and a pourboire of another twenty.’

“ ‘Agreed,’ said I, ‘provided you row well and avoid any chance craft.’

“He took the oars, and I devoted myself to the resuscitation of Toinette, who was already showing signs of returning consciousness. She came around quickly, for her bath had not been a very trying one; and on her first words of intelligence I bent over her and whispered:

“ ‘Say nothing. Keep quiet. It is Levignet.’

“The name terrified her. She made a sudden effort to rise, but as I pressed down firmly on her shoulders with a friendly admonition, she moaned, sank down again into the bottom of the boat and remained dumb and inert during the remainder of the journey.”

V

WHEN we pulled up to the quay landing I sent my new accomplice for a closed cab, and in his absence I addressed myself to the difficult task of persuading Mademoiselle 'Toinette that the trustiest friend she had in Paris was by her side. I so far succeeded as to induce her to walk up and down the quay with me in order to start her blood into activity, for she was chilled to the heart. I forced her into rather a violent effort to keep pace with me, for I felt the need of the exercise myself; and by the time my man returned to say the cab waited at the foot of the street, I fancy we were both in as comfortable a glow as the condition of our garments and the temperature of the air permitted. She accompanied me to the cab without objection. I assisted her in, paid my confederate, ordered the cabman to drive straight ahead lively, and got in beside my wet charge, huddled in the corner. When I was well out of range of my accomplice, I gave the cabman my address, and in a few minutes I had consigned my charge to the care of my housekeeper, with instructions to keep an eye on her. There was no special need of that injunction, however. Old

Suzel is, as you have no doubt observed in your visits to me, a domestic phenomenon. Feminine intuition has reached its highest state of development in Suzel—as virgin as Jeanne d'Arc and as old as Methusaleh. If I had ushered Mademoiselle into the house without a word, Suzel would have said to herself at the first glance: 'Ah! Monsieur has dragged from the river a would-be suicide. She is richly dressed and has jewelled rings, therefore it was not a release from hardship and famine she sought. She is young and of incomparable beauty, therefore it is not an ordinary love affair—for it is impossible a man in the passion of youth could desert such a creature. Her eyes and forehead are the enemies of vice, therefore there has been no vulgar liaison. But there is a desperate fear, the agony of humble pride in her expression. M. Levignet has not notified the police, therefore he knows her, and wishes to protect her. *Eh, bien.* Suzel knows what to do.'

"So the wise old soul did not trouble me with a question. I had no thought of seeing Mademoiselle again before morning, and after getting into a comfortable flannel negligee, I flung down onto a sofa with a brandy bottle by my side, and fell to reading Flaubert's masterpiece, 'Madame Bovary,' for the hundredth time. The book is morbid, I grant you; but it has a marvellous tonic power for all that. It is one of the great things of our

modern literary output, but it loses its bloom in your English translations.

"I had been reading in a ruminating sort of way, for an hour or more, when a startling conviction, sprung in the most unaccountable way from my subconsciousness, caused me to toss the book aside, jump to my feet and run upstairs to rap at the door of the room in which Suzel was attending to Mademoiselle.

"Suzel came to the door.

"'Can Mademoiselle see me?' I asked.

"'Yes. She will not go to bed.'

"I entered the room.

"Toinette, presenting a droll figure, in a bundle of Suzel's clothes, sat moodily by a blazing fire, none the worse, apparently, for her attempt to find the bottom of the Seine. Her left elbow was on the arm of the chair, her head leaning heavily on her hand, and I looked eagerly to see if the ring I had restored to her was on her finger. It was. 'So,' said I to myself, 'we'll see.'

"I inquired if she was comfortable, and sat down to engage her in conversation. She made no reply to my overtures, not so much as changing her position, until I adopted the tactics of soundly berating Suzel for having neglected to show a proper regard to the needs of Mademoiselle. The wily Suzel affected to defend herself with stupid excuses, and seemed on the point of coming to tears under

my reproaches. It had the desired effect. 'Toinette raised her hand and said listlessly:

" 'Please don't scold her. She has been very kind. She has wearied me with attention. If you will permit it, I should like to be left alone.'

" She did not look toward me, and as her hands lay half folded in her lap she began turning the ring on her finger, in a restless, almost anxious way.

" 'You shall be left alone, mademoiselle.'

" I arose as if to go, and dismissed Suzel. I went toward the door and said good-night, without taking my eyes from 'Toinette. I saw her nervously slip the ring from her finger.

" 'Pardon me, mademoiselle,' I said, turning back. 'But I meant to ask you a question last evening, which I hope you will not think impertinent at this time, as I may forget to ask you in the morning.'

" She made no answer, and I came close to her, speaking carelessly: 'I was struck with the odd setting of the ring. It is Oriental, is it not?'

" 'I do not know, monsieur.'

" 'Has it been long in your possession?'

" 'No.'

" 'Was it made for you?'

" 'No; it—it was given to me.'

" 'May I look at it again?'

" She hesitated a moment, then silently handed it to me, watching me intently as I cursorily examined

it. Presently as I fingered lightly at the main setting, she held up her hand, saying abruptly:

" 'Give it to me.'

" I looked into her eyes without offering to return the ring.

" 'I see, mademoiselle, that you are eager to ascertain if the water has injured the powder which this setting conceals.'

" She sank back in the chair and stared up at me with anything but a pitiful expression. There was rather an alarming composure in the steady gleam of her eyes. I felt a thrill of pleasure with the thought that she was quite capable of killing me in that instant were the means at her disposal. It was the look that went with the pin-thrust that cost Chartier his life. I understood it perfectly. This girl was so sensitive to the shadow of disgrace that she was ready to take any step that would enable her to escape its visitation.

" 'What do you intend to do with me?' she asked.

" 'That will depend entirely upon yourself, as I told you last evening, mademoiselle. Perhaps, like me, you are something of a fatalist. Let us consider. Chance led me to save you from drowning; it has led me to prevent your use of the powder in this ring. Who knows but Chance took me, rather than another, to the house in the rue de l'Université a certain night, in order that sym-

pathetic, appreciative intelligence might save you from the consequence of—an indiscretion? You imagine now that you see in me an implacable agent of the law, an official Nemesis in masculine guise; but you forget that it is the province of Justice to defend, to protect, to shield, no less than to destroy and avenge. You assume that there is no escape for you except by taking your own life. I wish to assure you that I will befriend you to just the extent that you can convince me that you merit my compassion. You see what an advantage I offer you. I am predisposed—perhaps weakly so—in your favour. Be persuaded to improve the opportunity. Tell me your story—frankly, fully, honestly, for I warn you that I shall detect the slightest deviation from truth, and when I am wounded in vanity—well, mademoiselle, I put aside the man and invoke the criminal expert.’

“This was rhodomontade, my dear Summer-ville, but nothing is so effective with women of the ultra-romantic temperament; and it is ultra-romantic, you know, to wear a ring with a cache for poison. It transformed Mademoiselle ’Toinette. I was once adrift in a dory for three days without food or drink, and when by the morning light of the fourth day I saw a barque bearing toward me, I swooned with the joy of it. So I was not surprised that ’Toinette rose from her chair with a cry, and fell fainting at my feet.”

VI

I LEAVE you to infer with what zeal I set about ministering to the needs of my interesting guest. I am not inexpert in the art of putting women right, and Mademoiselle 'Toinette was sensible of my efficiency. She smiled her acknowledgments and proved her sincerity by entering at once upon the recital of her story.

"It was, as you would expect, a veritable commonplace of the social epic. I anticipated every detail of it. There are only two stories in the sum of human romance, and, given the starting-point, the adept may easily provide the incidental sequences, without other aid than the rule of simple addition. That her narrative squared in all essential particulars with the theory I had elaborated to Dr. Ribault more than once was merely an evidence that my intelligence was normal. I have no patience with that phase of popular credulity which ascribes genius to any fellow who may pretend to a delphic property because he is able to discern a difference between two plus two and four minus two. Intuition is nothing but the perception of a visible truth. Deduction is only a recognition of the invariable law of cause and effect. *Nom de*

Dieu! Any fool can develop a theory; but, when all is said and done, the greatest detective is Chance, as I had the honour to remark earlier in the evening.

“Briefly, then, Mademoiselle Antoinette Beaudais came of good family. Self-evident fact. One of the oldest and best of French families. Presumptive fact. City-bred, but not Parisienne. Self-evident fact. The cherished, one may say spoiled, daughter of an early-widowed mother. Presumptive fact. You don’t like the analytical process? Very well. To your prejudice. Her native place was Marseilles, where she grew into young womanhood, inspired to a sense of the value of life by occasional short visits to Paris, as the guest of her uncle, her mother’s only brother. Returning from one of these visits, accompanied by her elderly maid, it was her fortune to ride in the same compartment with a strikingly handsome man—many years her senior, it is true, but still in the verdure of his years. In a long journey, an agreeable man is not without opportunities to invade the reserve of the most circumspect, the most attentively chaperoned of damsels. In this instance, neither the young girl nor the maid saw the necessity to rebuff the proffered courtesies of a gentleman so politely deferential, so unobtrusively devoted. Before the journey’s end, Mademoiselle Toinette, who was then seventeen, and M. Mar-

tin, still on the gallant side of forty-five, as I have intimated, had established a sympathy of sentiments more ardent than the character of their introduction warranted. But—to excuse her—'Toinette had the vivacious candour of the Southern temperament and the over-confident pride of spirited innocence. She was flattered as a *jeune fille* by the undisguised admiration of *un homme distingué*. What asses the old masters were to depict the typical man of the world with cloven hoof and a spiked tail! We cast about, trying to detect Lucifer by the smell of brimstone, while he smilingly locks arms with us, exhaling the perfume of the rue de la Paix.

“M. Martin claimed the right of escorting Mademoiselle to the house, and making himself known to Madame Beudais. That estimable lady was somewhat scandalised by the irregularity of the proceeding, you may be sure; but an accomplished lawyer, seconded by the generous enthusiasm of a thoroughly trusted and trustworthy daughter, did not find it difficult to smooth the feathers of the ruffled maternal prejudice and give them an extra gloss in the process.

“M. Martin won the respect of Madame Beudais as easily as he had ensnared the artless, romantic fancies of Mademoiselle. He represented himself as a single gentleman of private station but large fortune, and spoke so familiarly of famous

Parisians, political, social and professional, that Madame Beaudais was overwhelmed with the honour of knowing a person of such worldly consequence. She invited him to dine the following evening.

"Such an auspicious beginning was the surety of a rosy sequel. I can put myself into the frame of mind of M. Martin, as he retired from the presence of mother and daughter after an interview so entirely to his advantage. Shall I deliver you a homily on the ethics of parental supervision? No? You are right. No wisdom is proof against the fortuitous, and maternal instinct is as illogical as a rat gnawing through the wainscot of a deserted chamber."

VII

THE intimacy between M. Martin and the Beudais waxed apace. His visits from Paris to Marseilles became more and more frequent, his stays in the maritime town more prolonged. Strolls in the Prado, drives along the coast, excursions by boat, anything, everything to further the schemes of the rascally Eros. Of course Madame Beudais hovered, watchful, over the proprieties, but, until you invent a duenna with as many eyes as Argus and the prevision of Sibyl, you must not blame a doting mother if she sometimes sees neither the hawk nor the hernshaw.

“Finally, M. Martin made a formal proposal for the hand of Mademoiselle. Rapture of the seventh heaven! 'Toinette a gossamer on the bosom of Zephyrus! Only the rapture was subdued and the west wind chilled by the prompt arrival from Paris of a packet of papers addressed to M. Jules Martin, which that unhappy gentleman hastened to spread before the eyes of Madame and her daughter. Soul-harrowing intervention of the unforeseen! In some mysterious way, the intention of Monsieur to marry had become known in Paris. His legal advisers had taken the liberty of forwarding papers to remind him that, in the event

of his marriage before the demise of a certain elderly lady, Monsieur must forfeit the half of his fortune to the said lady, her heirs and assigns forever. The surrender of half his possessions would be an inconvenience to Monsieur; and the idea was the more intolerable for the reason that the lady to benefit by the partition was already nine-tenths gathered to her fathers, with scarce a twelve-month's tenure of life left to her. But if the sacrifice of fortune was insupportable, the abandonment of his joyous prospects as the husband of Mademoiselle was impossible. The delay of a year to the consummation of his ideal hopes, proposed by Madame Beudais, was equally out of the question. What to do? The simple solution of the problem was, of course, a secret marriage—a secret to be guarded only during the brief, though vexatious, period through which the elderly lady would be able to persist in her annoying longevity. Vigorous protests from Madame; tears from Mademoiselle; persuasive arguments from Monsieur! A passionate week of conflicting interests. *Eh, bien!* When the positive evades you, the expedient comes into play. The confidence of 'Toinette and the assurances of Monsieur prevailed over the scruples and pride of Madame. Sentiment discomfited judgment, as it has a disastrous habit of doing, and Madame Beudais lent herself to a plan that hurried the three of them off to London, M.

Martin going two days in advance to prepare a place for the ladies. The sullen skies of England would have brought Madame Beaudais to repentance before the legal formalities were done with, if the weather-proof sentiments of her daughter had not been a palliative of melancholy. The indulgent creature braved it out, not without murmurings, and was rewarded in due time with the privilege of raining beneficent tears upon the fluttering breast of 'Madame Martin,' as they drove from the church after a decisive ceremony. While they were rejoicing in a nuptial breakfast *à trois*, served in a private room of a quiet hotel, 'M. Martin' drew from his waistcoat pocket a curious and costly ring, which he offered to the admiration of the ladies.

" '*Cherie*,' he said to 'Toinette, 'a plain gold ring on your finger will excite the curiosity of your friends and imperil our precious secret. I propose, therefore, that you substitute this for the simple telltale, until the danger is past. I will put it on your finger with the wish that our public re-marriage by the beloved curé of your own native parish may be no longer delayed than our return to Marseilles a month hence.'

" Madame Beaudais had a superstitious horror of the removal of the wedding ring, and marshalled the folk lore of the Midi for the past thousand years to sustain her objection, in addition to urging

the impiety of the act. But the eagerness of 'Toinette to possess the treasure, and the lovingly good-natured banter of M. Martin were too much for the resistance of the pliant mamma, who already began to be aware of the decline of maternal authority. The exchange of rings was made, and Monsieur slipped the plain gold one into his pocket for 'safe-keeping.'

" 'Some time,' he said laughingly, 'I will show you how much more valuable that ring you have is than you suspect, for it has the power to cure all the ills of life that press too heavily on you!'

" So it was that 'Toinette came to have the cache-poison jewel that gave me the honour of her acquaintance. Look you. I have it now."

Levignet took the ring from a case he drew from his breast-pocket and passed it across the table to me. When I had returned it to him, after commenting on its richness and beauty of workmanship, he tapped the main setting with his finger, and remarked, with a fantastical glance and smile:

" Do you know, my dear Summerville, that if I ever get quite, quite weary of this delectable Paris, I think it would be sweet to go to rest under the benediction of Mademoiselle 'Toinette."

" You—you, Levignet! You take poison! Preposterous! "

" It would not be poison, it would be ambrosia, my friend," he replied, with an unaccustomed touch

of sentiment in his tone, as he restored the ring and case to his pocket.

"Upon my word, Levignet," I said jestingly, "I believe you are in love with the memory of 'Toinette!'"

"*C'est vrai*," he replied simply, for the first time lapsing into French, for he was rather proud of his English. "*Il n'y a qu'une seule fleur dans le jardin de mon cour.*"

I respected the confession, and there were a few moments of silence between us, during which Levignet trimmed and lighted a cigar.

"*Allons donc!* To our muttons," he resumed, in the old, half cynical, half-humorous tone, blowing a canopy of smoke over his head. "A gay month followed the 'wedding.' Honey and rose colour everywhere. Mad rushes to historic spots that were seen through a haze of amatory emotions; dashes to Continental spas and casinos, dissipated capitals and romantic seclusions, German towns and Italian hamlets—the usual *olla podrida* of the honeymoon incontinence. Then, affecting leave-takings as Madame Beudais headed for Marseilles and M. and Mme. Martin hurried to Paris, Monsieur having business that urgently demanded his presence.

"The question had been how to deal with the uncle of 'Toinette, the General de Francault. Should he be admitted into the secret? Madame

Beudais had urged that her brother be taken fully into the confidence, but M. Martin advanced so many irrefutable reasons for the postponement of the conference that 'Toinette was convinced of the superior wisdom of his plan. It was agreed that General de Francault should be kept in the dark for the present. There were difficulties, of course. 'Toinette could not easily remain long in Paris without risk that the fact would become known to the General or some member of his family. The bold course always offers the largest degree of security, as M. Martin very well knew, so he wisely determined to have 'Toinette go at once to the avuncular residence in her virgin character, her maid, blissfully ignorant of any change in the state of her young mistress, coming from the South to give colour to the innocent deception.

“ But provision had to be made for the pursuit of conjugal happiness, and to that end M. Martin introduced 'Toinette to a certain Madame Clifton, an Englishwoman supposed to be fabulously rich, who had come to reside in Paris because a constitutional delicacy made the climate of London intolerable to her. The readily received excuse for the intimacy that established itself between Madame Clifton and 'Toinette was the desire of 'Toinette to acquire a knowledge of the English tongue. Everything is justified, my dear Summer-ville, that furthers the quest of knowledge, and I

do not pretend to charge General de Francault with unpardonable laxity in permitting his niece to enjoy a large freedom in her intercourse with Madame Clifton, whom he could but accept at her own valuation. I have myself met few women who bring to the service of the devil such a thoroughly puritan severity of conduct and demeanour as distinguishes that remarkable woman. A church devotee, a rigorous observer of all the external proprieties, as exclusive as the most punctilious of the French noblesse, she went far, in the two chance conversations I have had with her, to shake my faith in the truth of 'Toinette's story in its relation to her. She became a frequent guest of the de Francaults, and so completely gained the esteem of the family that it was regarded as a privilege to have 'Toinette in her care even for a week at a time. I need not tell you that M. Martin knew the open sesame to Madame Clifton's mansion, which served him when 'Toinette was a visitor.

"One evening, when the three were sitting over their coffee after dinner, Madame Clifton suddenly asked, with a rather peculiar smile:

" 'Well, monsieur, how much longer is the coup to be deferred? I begin to find the situation troublesome.'

" 'Ah,' said Monsieur dolorously, turning to fix his eyes on 'Toinette, 'Madame Clifton is becoming anxious. She is expecting friends to stop with

her, and fears that she cannot conceal from them a secret so necessary to our future welfare, my beloved 'Toinette. The cruel lady is to turn us out, my soul.'

"'Turn us out,' echoed 'Toinette. 'What then, are we to do, *mon mari*? I shall not be able to see you!'

"'Give yourself no uneasiness on that score, *cherie*,' said M. Martin, playfully tossing a crumb of biscuit at her. 'Drive that cloud of anxiety from your eyes. It is not as serious as you fear. I have taken a house that shall be our home—quite a home of our own, where we shall be as independent as becomes a devoted married couple.'

"'But I cannot go there!' objected 'Toinette. 'How could I explain my absence from my uncle?'

"'You will have nothing to explain, my dear,' interposed Madame Clifton. 'Your uncle shall not know that you do not come to me as usual. It is much the better arrangement, my dear, and will take some tension off my nerves.'

"'Toinette was soon enthusiastic over the idea of being mistress of her own home.

"'Come,' said M. Martin, 'get together what things are necessary, and we will go to make acquaintance of our new home this very evening.'

"It was done as M. Martin suggested, and 'Toinette passed her first night in the house in the rue de l'Université."

VIII

FIVE months of clandestine romance passed unclouded, and then by degrees, the manner of Monsieur changed somewhat. He became less ardent in his devotion. He pleaded occupations. He often failed of his appointments, and 'Toinette passed lonely nights in the desolate house, having been forbidden by Monsieur to be friendly with Mme. Arnot, the housekeeper. He would make journeys that kept him from town for a week or two, without offering to take 'Toinette with him. Most unpleasant of all, he began to hint that it might be better for 'Toinette to return to Marseilles until the 'elderly lady' had been wafted to a region that takes no reckoning of forfeitures and reversions of a material character.

"'Toinette, though of a trustful nature, did not lack discrimination. Her pride was touched, at length, and the awkwardness of her position as an unacknowledged wife sharpened her resentment of unkindnesses that were very near akin to humiliating slights. She came to the conclusion that her personal rights were superior to any consideration of estates and fortunes, and that it was more important to establish her wifeness in the respect of her family and acquaintances than to secure a for-

tune greater than her needs by means which her calm judgment condemned as despicable and fraudulent.

"Having resolved to set the matter in this light before the mind of M. Martin, and yet apprehensive of his opposition, 'Toinette drove to the house of Madame Clifton to consult her as a friend. Madame Clifton was very sympathetic. She concurred entirely in the views of 'Toinette. 'When was she to see M. Martin?' 'Toinette had had an appointment with him that evening.

"'I was to have gone there to dine with him. But I was troubled. I have been of a mind not to see him in this way again. He may have got tired of waiting for me, and left the house.'

"'Go see,' advised Madame Clifton. 'And after you have talked with him, come tell me what he says. I am curious.'

"Madame Clifton laughed in a way that struck 'Toinette oddly.

"'Why do you laugh?'

"'You young girls are so droll,' replied Madame Clifton. 'Trifling distinctions make such a vast difference in your views of the commonplace. But I hope you will have good judgment.'

"'Toinette took a cab to the rue de l'Université. M. Martin having given up the expectation of seeing her, had dined alone, sparingly, and, complaining of a headache, had gone to his room.

"Toinette found him already asleep in bed.

"'Oh! you have come?' he asked, on being aroused. 'I despaired of seeing you. Pardon me that a megrim was too much for my gallantry. I took some morphine and I fear I'm too heavy-witted to talk agreeably. I shall fall asleep in the midst of a sentence. We can chat over our coffee in the morning. My impression is that I have something to tell you. Come.'

"'No' said Toinette 'I shall never again be a wife to you until you have properly presented me to your friends and freed me from the necessity of deceiving my own.'

"'Very well. We can discuss that in the morning. I'm too dull for an argument now.'

"'There is to be no argument. You must take me out of this false position at once. I shall refuse to see you until you come as my husband to claim me in my uncle's house.'

"'Oh, very well,' said Monsieur, with a laugh. 'Let it be that way.'

"His careless speech, his indifference, filled Toinette with a fear she could not define.

"'You will let me be separated from you? You think more of the superfluous part of your fortune than you do of your wife—her happiness—her credit—her honour?'

"'My dear Toinette, if you are going to be melodramatic, first hand me that phial on the table

there. I must clear my head to appreciate your rhapsody. I have wondered what your anger would be like. You have a splendid face for the violent emotions.'

" 'Toinette turned to the table to fetch him the phial, and, in reaching for it, knocked a silver card-case to the floor from a heap of articles M. Martin had left near the edge of the table. The case flew open and scattered some cards on the rug. 'Toinette took the antidote to M. Martin, who drank a portion of the liquid, re-corked the phial and placed it under his pillow.

" 'Now, *cherie*, if you will have the grace to remove your hat, to give a more sociable air to our tête-à-tête, I will undertake to persuade you to change your resolutions.'

" 'Toinette silently took off her hat, and, on going to put it on the table, observed the fallen case and scattered cards. She stooped to pick them up, as M. Martin was saying:

" 'We are all creatures of destiny, my well-beloved, and are no more responsible for the motives that impel us to action than we are for the accidents that befall us. A foolish convention has placed our natural instincts and holiest impulses under the ban, and has anathematised the very law that gave us being; but intelligent minds that see clearly above and beyond the ignorant prejudices of the vulgar, perceive that return to the laws of Nature

is inevitable—— Good Heaven! What is the matter?’

“Toinette had read the inscription on one of the cards, and, excitedly comparing it with the others, had uttered a cry of consternation on finding that all the cards bore the same distinguished name.

“‘Whose cards are these?’ she demanded fearfully, holding them toward him as she hurried to the bedside. ‘Are they your own?’

“‘And if they are, loveliest of women?’

“‘Are you Judge Chartier?’

“‘Is it not an honourable name, *cherie*?’

“‘And you are not Jules Martin?’

“‘Oh, yes—to you, belle Toinette.’

“‘Oh, God! Oh, God!’

“She clutched at her breast, and stared at him. She gazed with motionless horror into the handsome face, seeing a mockingly confident smile parting the dark-bearded lips, a cruelly triumphant twinkle in the eyes that regarded her. She was dumb-stricken with the agony of the one thought that beat at her brain.

“‘What does it matter, Tonine? Paris is the elysium of souls like ours. It is the paradise of unwritten romance. You are but one of thousands who give brilliance to our gay world. What signifies a name to the joyous?—*mari* or *amant*, *madame* or *maitresse*! Have we not been happy? Shall

we not be happier still? Shall a priest say when and how much we may drink from the chalice of Life! Come, my beautiful! I hold out my arms to you. If you have been deceived in them, it was the deception of love. Let love make reparation. I am yours; you are mine. Come; the inevitable is the divine. Destiny has united us. Let us not profane the decree of Fate.'

"It seemed to 'Toinette that she had lost command over her powers and faculties. She listened, standing in the fixed attitude of despair, silent, numb, not conscious of an emotion.

"'What! are you turned to stone? Then Pygmalion's kisses shall quicken the glorious Galatea!'

"He rose laughingly and came toward her, his arms outstretched to embrace her. The stiletto-like pin she had taken from her hat was still in her hand. He caught her in his arms and drew her toward him, laughing. The laugh sharpened into a cry; his hold upon her relaxed; he fell to the floor. There were some spasmodic movements, and he lay still."

IX

TOINETTE, vaguely realising what had happened, knelt beside him, passionately calling him by name, trying to raise him. A blood-stain on the bosom of his night robe caught her eye. A great fear seized her. She rose, snatched up her hat, ran from the room and down into the street.

"A cab was just passing the door, but the driver, nodding sleepily on the box, did not observe her. She crouched among the shadows till the way was clear, and then ran swiftly, like one pursued. She was not aware of the direction she followed until she found herself, panting and exhausted, pulling at the bell of Madame Clifton's street door. The cord was pulled by the concierge and she entered, slamming the door behind her. She called her name to the concierge as she passed the window and hurried up the dark stairs. She beat at Madame's door, and after a time Madame herself admitted her.

" 'What brings you here at this hour?' she demanded apprehensively.

" 'I have killed him.'

" Madame Clifton hurried her into the bedroom

and bolted the doors, and then, seizing 'Toinette by the shoulders, flung her upon the bed, clutched her by the throat and seemed bent on strangling her as she cried:

“ ‘How dared you come here! How dared you come to me! You miserable thing! Do you think I am to be ruined by you! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you!’ ”

“ ‘Nothing better could have happened to 'Toinette. The physical violence roused, as nothing else could have done, the instinct of self-preservation. Her efforts to save herself from the furious rage of her assailant drove from her mind the horror of the last half-hour. She was the younger and the stronger woman. She freed herself, and ran to open a window.

“ ‘If you come near me, I will call to the people in the street!’ ”

“ ‘Come away from the window! I won’t touch you! But you must quit my house! I will not have you found here!’ ”

“ ‘Where shall I go?’ ”

“ ‘What do I care! Go to your uncle—or to the river; the river is the safer place for such mad fools as you! But leave my house! Now! Now!’ ”

“ ‘Yes, I will go to the river. It is the better place for mad fools like me.’ ”

“ ‘Madame Clifton hastened to unbolt the door

and open it as 'Toinette came toward her. But, suddenly changing her mind, she closed and fastened it again.

“ ‘No. I won’t trust you. You haven’t the courage to go to the river. You will go to your uncle, and snivel out some lie to throw the blame on me. I know your kind. I’ll not lose sight of you. You shall go with me. Come! Come! Help me to pack. I know a hole where we can hide until I find a chance to get away from this cursed France, then you may go to the devil. Fool! fool! fool! You didn’t know enough to mend a torn garment. You needs must hang yourself with it.’

“ The idea of flight seized upon the disordered mind of 'Toinette. She obeyed feverishly the directions of Madame Clifton, and their common peril established a truce between them as they made their preparations. In a few minutes, provided only with light hand-bags, they left the rooms, locking the doors behind them, and hurried down the stairs. It was necessary to arouse the concierge to open the outer door. Madame Clifton made a virtue of the necessity. She rapped at the window, calling, until the concierge came grumblingly to open it.

“ ‘Monsieur Fodel, Mademoiselle Beudais has received word that her mother is dangerously ill. I am going to Marseilles with her. I shall be gone

several days. Explain to anyone who calls. Open the door, please.'

"They found a cab in the next street.

"Gare de Lyons,' ordered Madame Clifton.

"'At what time can I get a train for Marseilles?' she demanded at the ticket window of the station.

"'Train for Lyons in twenty minutes, madame.'

"'Two tickets for the first class. Is there a compartment exclusively for ladies?'

"'Yes, madame.'

"At train time Madame Clifton ostentatiously conferred with the guard, tipped him to secure Mademoiselle and herself in the compartment, and in a variety of ways attracted attention to herself before entering the carriage to take her place beside 'Toinette. As soon as the guard turned to leave them, Madame took from her pocket a railway carriage key, and proceeded to unlock the opposite door.

"'Be ready to follow me,' she said to 'Toinette. 'The moment the train starts, we will get out. Be careful how you jump down. If you fall, I shall not wait for you.'

"Madame's ingenious plan was successfully carried out, perilous as it was. You may blame me, but I respect a resourceful, definitive intelligence, my dear Summerville. Even a criminal genius is a splendid abnormality. Some day I will

give you a convincing proof that Madame Clifton has the kind of perverted talent that would immortalise a Cabinet Minister had he the use of it. That as it goes. But I have not erred in including Madame Clifton among the exceptionally endowed protagonists of the social comedy. Ninety-nine women in a hundred of her general type would have figured on the probable advantage of six or eight hours free time before the discovery of the body of Judge Chartier, and would have made haste to get out of Paris, if not out of France entirely. Madame Clifton asked for no better asylum than the open streets of Paris.

"Within an hour after the retreat from the train, Madame Clifton and 'Toinette were safely sheltered in an upper back room of a miserable tenement somewhere off the Faubourg St. Denis, and a forbidding looking crone, fulsomely devoted to Madame, was parcelling them out coarse garments to put on in place of their own."

X

WHEN the sun came peering over the housetops to cheer the alert 'pavement merchants' in the neighbourhood of the Porte St. Denis, Madame Clifton and 'Toinette, transformed by smirchings of lamp-black as well as by their unaccustomed attire, sat on opposite corners of the way, ready to vend flowers from their ample baskets.

" 'This is our business for the next week or ten days,' Madame Clifton admonished 'Toinette. 'Don't play the fool with your pretty face; and haggle for the sous. At the end of the week I shall know what to do.'

"The morning papers appeared, and though they contained no mention of the midnight affair in the rue de l'Université, they were none the less eagerly scanned by the miserable 'Toinette, to whom the hours had been ages, and to whose ear every footstep behind her sounded a note of terror. Madame Clifton, on the contrary, would have been perfectly serene and found pleasure in her excellently sustained impersonation but for a trifling anxiety lest 'Toinette should betray herself.

"At noon, they took up their nearly emptied

baskets and trudged back to the tenement off the Faubourg St. Denis, Madame saying to 'Toinette:

“‘I am very well satisfied with you. You have shown more courage and self-possession than I thought you had. There may be something in you after all. If there is, I can give you a career. I shall see how you will behave this afternoon, when the evening papers come out. They will be sure to have it, and everybody will be talking about it. You must nerve yourself to listen to the street comment without moving a muscle. Get used in your own mind to hearing them talk about the assassination of Judge Chartier; then, when you really do hear them, you can keep your head! I will practice it with you when we get home to our attic.’

“‘Toinette moaned a protest.

“‘Don't be a fool. The universe hasn't suspended operations because of what you have done. Everything is going on the same. You attach too much importance to yourself. You egotists ridiculously exaggerate the significance of your doing and not doing. You imagine that all Paris is thinking about you now. No one is thinking about you but ourselves. There are five million egotists in Paris. Half of them are assassins in fact or potentially. Don't give yourself airs. It is not such a wonderful thing to kill a man. Judge Chartier was amusing and useful, and I shall miss

him; but what I regret most is the loss of the 50,000 francs he paid me annually. If you had not been such a silly provincial, everything might have been charmingly arranged. I hate fools who make a fetich of virtue—as if there were really room for such a fantastical cult in our busy world. This is the age of gold—nothing else counts. If you have plenty of that, you need no other credentials. You will find that out before you are much older, if you will let me save you from the predicament into which your silly sentiments have pushed you.'

"Madame Clifton's practical way of viewing the situation was revolting to 'Toinette; but I imagine the tactics were precisely the ones needed to meet the emergency, for they served to make 'Toinette lay hold on herself and pull herself resolutely together. Our antipathies often serve us better in crises than our sympathies. As for me, my ambition is to play my wits against Madame Clifton one day. It will come; it will come, my friend.

"When Madame heard them crying *Le Jour, La Patrie* in the streets, she hastened to get copies and turn to the sensation page. The first glance disconcerted her. There was the matter for which she looked—but what unexpected headlines—what an undreamed-of tone in the article! No hint of assassination, no suggestion of mystery—

merely an elaborate obituary notice in the professional vein of lamentation over a public character suddenly struck down in a prosaically natural way! Judge Chartier had passed a light-hearted evening with his friend Dr. Ribault! In the very midst of leave-taking, he gave a startled exclamation and fell, caught in the arms of his friend! The doctor, who only too well conjectured what was the nature of the attack, immediately administered restoratives; but he soon saw that there was little hope of saving his friend's life! His thoughts turned to the stricken family awaiting the return of the beloved husband and father! Could he get Judge Chartier home in time to allow wife and daughter at least one last look upon his living face? The attempt should be made! Dr. Ribault ordered out his carriage with all speed, the semi-conscious gentleman was borne to it carefully and driven to his home in the Avenue d'Antin! But it was only the shell of the noble and gifted soul that was carried into the library and laid reverently on the leather sofa!

"What did it all mean? Madame looked from one to the other of the two papers, but the accounts were substantially the same, and the editorial comment was in accord with them. She went into the back room, where 'Toinette lay on the bed, her face hidden in the pillow.

" 'Here, get up! Look at this!' Madame com-

manded. 'Have you been making a fool of yourself, or is this all rubbish?'

"Toinette read the article in a dazed, bewildered way. She could not comprehend it. Was it all illusion? Was that frightful vision which seemed to have burnt into her brain only the creation of her heart-sick fancy? But her glance fell upon the bandaged hand holding one side of the paper. If there was a dream, a fancy, an illusion, how came that triangular wound in her palm?

" 'I don't understand,' she said to Madame Clifton.

" 'This newspaper stuff is all a lie, then?'

" 'Yes.'

" 'Then there are but two possible explanations of it; either the family is determined to avoid a scandal by concealing the fact of the crime—or, the police have set a trap for us.'

" 'Oh, I am sure it is a trick of the police!' exclaimed Toinette, as if she were already in the web.

" 'My opinion is exactly the contrary,' said Madame, with positiveness. 'I do not credit the police with the cleverness to lay such a snare. The police are being duped themselves. I know this Dr. Ribault. He is an unscrupulous old fox, and he is an intimate of the Chartier household. It would not surprise me in the least if this whole story were his own concoction and he had imposed

it on the family. He has a reason of his own for deceiving the world, including the Chartiers, I haven't a doubt, and he befooled the mother and her children as he is now befooling the public. That is my theory, and I shall act on it. If my judgment is correct, we are absolutely safe. All we have to do is to get out of the little scrape into which we have fallen by our unnecessary flight. We must take the first train for Marseilles. The chances are that we will encounter none of the railway people who saw us last night. If we do, the simple way to cheat curiosity is to say that I felt too ill to travel last night, and that we left the train just before it started; and I can lament the delay in a fashion to convince shrewder men than railway employes. From Marseilles we will send a telegram to satisfy your uncle as to your running away without telling him, and we can manage your mother without difficulty.'

"Madame Clifton was as vivacious as one of the perennial *divettes* of a *café chantant*. She took her hand in the game started by Dr. Ribault with the gaiety of an unfailingly lucky and expert player.

"She called the old hag to fetch from hiding their proper toilettes and laughingly escaped explanations by tossing several gold pieces into the claws of the woman. The creature had no wish to question the conduct or sound the motive of a

patroness as liberal as she knew Madame Clifton to be. Ah! Summerville, Paris is a city of marvellous convenience for the exercise of one's genius, if one's purse has the right jingle. Midas need not have been ashamed of his ears had his palace fronted on our incomparable Champs Elysées. He might have flaunted them and his vices in the face of the modern world with splendid impudence as long as gold dropped from his finger-tips. Glorious age! I love it! We can scoff at the divinities of heaven while we propitiate Mammon with the largesse of material opulence. We have bound Religion and Mortality to the wheels of our gilded chariot and made them our bond-slaves. We fling coins into the folds of their mud-spattered garments, and they absolve us with smiling benediction. Church and State scramble in the offal for the minted tokens we fling there in our revels; and the incense of our altars, sacred and profane, is the intoxicating reek of our consuming passions that set the mad world dancing, priest and potentate, patriarch and judge, among the rest. If we worship gods of metal, let us reverence the priestesses of Matter, be they like the gorgeous Madame Clifton or like her sordid confederate of the Faubourg St. Denis. Big cog or little cog, whatever keeps the wheel spinning deserves the applause of the voluptuary. Fill your glass."

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XI

MADAME CLIFTON and 'Toinette make their way to Marseilles without adventure; despatch a serviceable message to General de Francault; persuade Madame Beudais to a few days of illness that is not altogether a sham, for the dear lady is languishing under a persistent cough caught out of the fogs of England; and at the end of a week Madame Clifton, leaving the wretched 'Toinette to cheer the invalidism of her mother, returns serenely to Paris and resumes the orderly life of benevolent piety so rudely, but needlessly interrupted. Meantime, a stout casket of mahogany, sealed under a marble block of substantial weight, had hidden the wax-filled puncture in the breast of Judge Chartier from the range of inquisitive eyes. Everything adjusted to a marvel. Nothing to fear; nothing to apprehend. Madame Clifton was free to drive at pleasure in the Bois; lean, lorgnette in hand, over the edge of her box at the Opera; relax her dignity in some favourite salon; nibble her partridge wing in what fashionable restaurant she chose, confident that "all Paris" looking on would approve her as the model of propriety.

"'Toinette remained with her mother, meeting the good woman's inquiries about M. Martin with evasions that in time grew into elaborate romances calculated to soothe the maternal solicitude. Broken hearts have a way of mending, you know, like the claw of a lobster, when Nature is the physician; but broken hearts do not mend under normal conditions any more readily than the stings of conscience abate under the influence of an increasing sense of security. In caring for her mother, 'Toinette gradually became less concerned about herself; and, when, a year or eighteen months later, Madame Beaudais shivered and shrank into silence at the passing of the Mistral, the only burden that weighed heavily on 'Toinette's heart was the loss of this most unwise, but tenderly loving and beloved mother.

"Having no other home, 'Toinette came to Paris in her orphanage to live with General de Francault, her uncle. That was in the early spring of 1891. It was an evening toward the end of November of that year that I saw her first, when I returned her the ring which I had got from Benoist."

Levignet emptied his glass, dried his moustache and tossed his serviette on the table.

XII

THERE, Summerville, you have my version of the story she told me in the small hours of the next morning, seated in the great chair of my guest chamber, her exquisite figure mocked by the ridiculous garments of old Suzel. She did not tell it as heartlessly as I have repeated it. No—for I was more than once glad that the condition of the fire gave me an excuse for turning my eyes from her, and more than once she needed my encouraging words to help her to go on.

“‘Mademoiselle,’ I said, when she had ended, ‘your secret is as safe as if you had hidden it under the Seine—safer, for the Seine is not always faithful to its trust. It often betrays its refugees. Beware of it. Your secret is safe with me, because in my heart and in my conscience I exonerate you. Others might not; I do, entirely. Besides our two selves there is only this Madame Clifton who could connect you with the regrettable accident which cost Judge Chartier his life. She is even more trustworthy than I, for she would not dare let it be suspected that she knows anything of that event. You can return to your uncle’s house in perfect security.’

“‘No—no—I cannot!’ she interrupted pit-
eously. ‘I have left a letter telling him that I
was going to the river—and why.’

“‘But you can justify yourself to him!’

“‘No! When he has read that letter, I shall
not have the courage to face him.’

“‘You wrote the letter after you had retired to
your room for the night?’

“‘Yes! I went early. All the guests had not
yet gone. That is how I managed to leave the
house without attracting the attention of the
concierge.’

“‘I looked at my watch. It was five o’clock in
the morning.

“‘Where did you leave the letter?’

“‘On my dressing-table.’

“‘What is the name of your concierge?’

“‘Borel—M. Borel.’

“‘Gaspard Borel, possibly?’

“‘I am not sure.’

“‘Formerly a bank messenger?’

“‘I do not know.’

“‘Humph! It may be. How long since you
have seen Madame Clifton?’

“‘Oh, monsieur!’

“‘Pardon me. Not since you returned to
Paris?’

“‘No, monsieur!’

“‘Very well.’ I rose. ‘It is necessary,

Mademoiselle, that you sleep. I shall send Suzel to you. Oblige me by being ruled by her. In the afternoon I shall see you again. In the meantime, courage. Dismiss your fears. Be at peace. I assure you that everything will be well.'

"I stroked her head encouragingly, and she rewarded me with the ghost of a grateful but troubled smile. I was about to restore her ring to her, but something in the smile made me uneasy, and I put the ring in my pocket and took my leave of her. My last view of her was the picture I carried in my mind for years. Pity is the heart's photographer par excellence.

"Suzel was dozing in the lower hall, but my footsteps on the stairs, light as they were, aroused her. Suzel is a sort of cat. I gave her instructions and sent her to 'Toinette. I hurried into my room and in an incredibly short time had dressed for the street and left the house.

"There was the faint, uncertain grey of the false dawn, and the market-women were beginning to trundle along with their barrows of garden produce. But there was not a cab in sight. I had walked half the distance to General de Francault's house before I came upon a cab, with the coachman sleeping inside. I shook him up and engaged him by the hour. We drove to the General's. I had defined my plan of action. Arrived at the number, I rang the bell. After I had re-

peated the performance several times, the great door was opened a few inches and the concierge demanded to know what was wanted.

“ ‘Are you M. Borel?’

“ ‘Yes. What does it matter?’

“ ‘Gaspard Borel, formerly bank messenger?’

“ ‘If I am, what is that to you? I am messenger no longer.’

“ He offered to close the door, but I prevented him.

“ ‘I am M. Levignet, formerly of the prefecture.’

“ The chain rattled and the door was opened to me. So much for having cleared an honest old fellow from the consequences of a police stupidity that had threatened him with a term of penal servitude. He was at my service for any respectable enterprise. I stated my pre-arranged case.

“ ‘Last evening, M. Borel, I had the good luck to return to Mademoiselle Beudais a valuable ring that had been stolen from her. The company in the salon had fatigued her, and she made the ring an excuse for retiring to her room for a little while. As she was going up the stairs, a servant handed her a note. It was from Madame Clifton, who is ill, M. Borel. Mademoiselle changed her dress and slipped out to pay a benevolent visit to her friend. As she alighted from the cab at Madame Clifton’s door, I chanced to be passing. Ma-

demoiselle did me the honour to recognise me, and offered again to thank me for the recovery of the ring. Suddenly she recollected that she had dropped the ring on to her dressing-table when about to change her dress, and, in her haste, forgot it. She was much distressed and was re-entering the cab to return for it—for, though she, of course, distrusts none of her uncle's servants——'

" 'I understand, monsieur,' M. Borel sensibly interposed as I hesitated diplomatically.

" 'I undertook to come in her stead and request your wife to get the ring for me that I might deliver it to Mademoiselle. Eh, well, M. Borel, I have had affairs—the matter slipped my mind. I had arrived home when it recurred to me. So I come at this untimely hour—for should I wait until the household is stirring——'

" 'I understand, monsieur,' the good fellow said again, to spare me the completion of an equivocal sentence.

" 'Could Mme. Borel gain access to the room of Mademoiselle without disturbing anyone in the house?' There would be no difficulty. Madame Borel, was, in fact, *femme de menage* and had free range of the house. Mme. Borel was called. She was round-faced, good-humoured, complaisant. She used to dance at the Bal Bullier and liked a touch of adventure. I suggested, with a familiar finger-thrust among M. Borel's well-covered ribs,

that it might add piquancy to the quest if I accompanied Madame. They both laughed appreciatively and Madame bade me 'come along then'; I followed her to the third floor, and entered 'Toinette's room.

"Perhaps, my dear Summerville, you have never crossed the threshold into the sacred room of the woman whose charm has filled your soul with a mysterious—— Umph! Pardon me.

"I took the ring from my pocket as I entered the room, and in pretending to search for it among the magnetic trifles and trinkets of the dressing-table, I easily secured possession of the letter lying there, without Mme. Borel being any the wiser. Then, holding the ring to view, I thanked her, slipped a twenty-franc piece into her hand and proposed that our burglarious enterprise be kept unknown to the family and servants; to which she readily agreed, but laughingly intimated that M. Borel also had a tongue wide enough to hold a yellow coin.

"My purpose accomplished, I returned to my cab and drove home.

"I had not been gone above an hour and a half, but it was an hour and a half too long. Suzel met me at the door, her face ashen with fear.

" 'Mademoiselle is gone.'

"There was a small balcony off the room into which Suzel had led 'Toinette to sleep. Below

the balcony a few feet, is the flat roof of a low building that had been a carriage house in the days of the former proprietor. From the roof to the ground is a drop of no more than twelve feet. Beyond is the garden. The street wall of the garden is fairly high, but 'Toinette proved that it is not insurmountable. For the first time in my life I felt beaten. To be beaten is to be humiliated. To be humiliated is oppressive. One may be pardoned for sinking into a chair and hiding the chagrin in his face with his hands. I remembered how black the river ran as I saw it in the grey dawn an hour before. I remembered the troubled smile on 'Toinette's lips as I took leave of her. Fool, not to have told her my mission!

" Suzel pulled me by the sleeve.

" 'There is a scrap of writing, monsieur. Perhaps——'

" I snatched it from her hand—a little folded slip torn from a writing-pad on the bedroom table. Three lines only. 'I go, monsieur; but have no fear. I shall do no harm to myself. I shall live. But now that my uncle knows, I dare not go back to him. Let him think that the river has washed away the disgrace. Adieu, my benefactor.'

" I never saw 'Toinette again, until she came into the café and sat at the table there to-night! Do you wonder that my pulses went up, and that I spoke too loud? It was only last week that I heard

of the marriage of the Baron de Noel to a lady in England, but I was not curious. I asked no questions, and I do not read my paper—it is trying enough to write for it—so I did not learn the lady's name. It was something more than surprising, then, to see 'Toinette on his arm."

"You do not think there is any doubt," I said hesitatingly, "that 'Toinette is really the lady whom the Baron married?"

Levignet's cheeks flushed and an unpleasant expression came into his eyes. I felt that I had made a mistake in putting into words my not wholly unreasonable surmise.

"Of course," I hastened to add, "the chance is that you are right; but, you will admit, the fact that a lady and gentleman enter a café together does not necessarily——"

Levignet interrupted by giving the floor a vigorous thump with the heavy walking-stick he had not surrendered.

"You challenge my friendship, M. Summer-ville!"

"Then, in the name of friendship, pardon my folly, dear Levignet!"

He looked at me a moment, then thrust his hand toward me.

"You have seen the Baroness de Noel," he said emphatically.

"And envied the Baron, my dear Levignet," I answered submissively.

We clasped hands, and a smile played under the arch of his moustache, a sunny, forgiving smile.

"M'sieu', s'vous plait."

It was the waiter, tendering the "addition."

Levignet glanced up, and looked with surprise about the deserted room. We were the only guests, and the doors were closed.

"Mon Dieu! Si tard?" demanded Levignet of the waiter.

"Mais oui, m'sieu'!" the waiter answered with a shrug anything but indulgent. *"C'est bien tard, vous pouvez voir. On ferme a une heure. Maintenant il est——"*

"Eh, bien! Prenez."

Levignet paid the bill, and we went into the street.

XIII

I DO not know how 'Toinette explained her resurrection to General de Francault and his family; but I do know that, as the Baroness de Noel, she became one of the celebrities of social Paris. The paragraphers never wearied of fashioning verbal arabesques to which they could fit her name. She was the leader of one set and the luminary of another; the foundress of this charity, the patroness of that; her box at the Opéra or at the Comédie divided honours with the stage; public fête or private reception owed something of its success to her presence; no woman at the Grand Prix was more simply dressed—no other woman was so much observed. The 'Toinette of old was the unfolding rose; the Baroness de Noel was the flower in perfect bloom. And Levignet hovered here and there and everywhere to catch a glimpse of its beauty, to breathe in the fragrance of its perfume.

I met him once briskly, airily traversing the principal walk of the Tuileries Gardens, humming the tag-end of the latest gay song of a popular *chanteuse*. He had just come from dining with 'Toinette and the Baron. He locked arms with

me as blithely as a schoolboy headed for sport. Nothing would do for it but that we should climb into an open voiture and be driven somewhere away from the rattle of the pavement, the noise of the city.

We took the road to Versailles, Levignet bidding the driver to keep straight ahead and go on and on "to the end of the world if I do not bid you stop!" How he talked and babbled and declaimed! Nothing of melancholy in his mood or manner now. The old sobriquet had lost its significance. Jacques had been transformed into Touchstone with all his lightness and none of his satire.

Of course 'Toinette was his theme—'Toinette in all the superlatives—'Toinette as the ideal of women—the paragon of sex. What wonder, since on both his cheeks he still felt the good-night kiss 'Toinette had bestowed on "her benefactor."

He ran over the outlines of her life between the morning in which she had fled from his house and the night, five years later, when she re-appeared to his view under the lights of the Café Riche.

She had returned to Marseilles and had gone to the little farm some miles away where a relative of her mother's lived as a sort of Donna Perfecta, ruling the village clergy and the peasants under her with equal hand. Madame Delphine received her young cousin very gladly, for her mother's sake,

Madame Delphine and Madame Beaudais having been affectionate friends in the years of their unmarried companionship, and the rural heart cherishes friendly sentiments even unto the second and third generations.

But there was a militant element in the piety of Madame Delphine, and she was not tolerant of mere passivity in religion. It was not enough for her that one believed; one must demonstrate belief in practice. Fasting and prayer and confession were, in her opinion, the mere rudimentary commonplaces of religious fidelity, the simple incidents of formal conduct. The essential thing was self-crucifixion, after the manner of the saints; and to her mind the model of devotion was St. Francis of Assisi, whom she had chosen as her patron. Therefore, she earnestly counselled 'Toinette to put away all vanities of the flesh; to renounce the ease which the inheritance from Madame Beaudais allowed her, and to bend her mind zealously and jealously to a life of self-denial and good works.

For a time, the course defined for her by Madame Delphine seemed to 'Toinette precisely the mental and moral corrective she required. She entered, with a kind of desperate enthusiasm, into the plan of renunciation, and put on serge literally and spiritually. She made a virtue of domestic drudgery, and cheerfully turned over her quarterly

revenues to the simple and kindly curé who came and went as Madame Delphine decreed. 'Toinette's great beauty sorely troubled Madame Delphine. It reminded her always of certain of the temptations that had beset St. Francis; and she feared the curé might find it a vexation to the serenity of his meditations. She recommended to 'Toinette a peasant bonnet that concealed the glory of her hair and hid the shining plane of her forehead. The effect was not entirely satisfactory. Eyes and lips and teeth like 'Toinette's were not to be abashed by the impertinences of a coarse cotton bonnet.

"Alas, child! You are hardly the better for it. Pity you are not like Irma there!"

Irma was a buxom wench helping the shearers with the sheep. She was still young, and gossip used to credit her with tendencies somewhat the reverse of austere; but two winters ago the pest had surprised her in Marseilles. When she saw the reflection of her pitted face in the hand-mirror, she dashed the glass to the floor and wept, kneeling among the fragments. But, drying her eyes after a time, she raised her head and laughed, slapping her hands against her cheeks till the pale hollows glowed. "All right! I can be good now. I can tempt no one—and no one will care to tempt me."

"And Irma has been beyond reproach these two years," said Mme. Delphine, rehearsing the story

to 'Toinette; "but the chastisement of heaven was necessary to her reformation. Ah, child, it is the Devil sends beauty into the world for the ruin of our souls. Pray the good Lord to remove from you the evil fruits of the curse laid on you."

This charitable wish and the spectacle of the sheep-shearing inspired Madame Delphine.

"Why not, Antoinette, have one of the shearers cut that mass of vanity from your head? Your face would not seem so vicious but for those glistening heaps of black hair! Shall I bid Jean come with his shears?"

"As you please, Cousin Delphine. It matters nothing to me."

Jean was called, and came with his shears, to which clung particles of wool from the shearing.

'Toinette took off her cotton bonnet, and loosed the coils of her hair, which slid down over her shoulders and far below her waist, enfolding her like a mantle.

"Cut that away, Jean," Madame Delphine commanded, as if she were ordering the removal of a profaning weed from the bed in which she grew her votive lilies, reared with holy care to deck the church altar on Easter morning.

Jean advanced a step.

"Cut that away, Madame Delphine?"

"Entirely."

Jean put out his hand and respectfully lifted a

quantity of the massy hair, letting it slide strand by strand from his fingers, shaking his head.

"I could almost as easily cut away the white crown of my mother's head, madame. I may shear sheep, for their wool is a blessing to man, of which the sheep are glad to be rid. But when God puts such a marvel as this on a woman's head, it is not for Jean Copan to court damnation by shearing it away."

"Do as I bid you," said Madame Delphine, in the even manner of one accustomed to prompt obedience. "The blame of it be on my soul, not on yours."

"Do as Madame commands you, Jean. I consent," 'Toinette said, smiling to reassure him.

"No. I have killed a Prussian and not minded it; but I have never marred God's handiwork. Look; our curé is coming down the path. Let him say."

"Hide your hair at once, Antoinette!" Madame Delphine whispered in consternation. "Father Bérthold is a holy man, but I do not know that it is the Lord's will to make a saint of him."

'Toinette went into the house to coil her scandalous hair in place under the ban of the cotton bonnet, as Madame Delphine, ordering Jean to go about his business, prepared to receive the curé.

XIV.

TOINETTE found that she had been amused by the petty incident. She laughed over the droll puritanism of her cousin and the æsthetic piety of Jean. And the laughter stirred dormant fancies into activity. The absurdity of the dull, narrow life to which she had committed herself began to play with her sense of humour. She had had a horror of the very idea of a prison, and the cloister had always seemed but little preferable to a prison; yet here she was, voluntarily, as she had thought gratefully, shut in by surroundings, constrained by conditions more sterilising, more obliterating than either the prison or the cloister, so much more barren than either was the church-sustaining farm that skirted a hamlet of dead-alive peasants.

Her first resolution was not to part with her hair even to spare the susceptibilities of the curé. And if her hair were something to guard, was not her life something to foster? Since she consented to live at all, would it not be well to live with the widest possible horizon? She revolved the problem in her mind through the summer peace and the autumnal mildness, and when the trees were scarlet on the hillside and the presses were crushing out the juices of the grape, she kissed the dry cheek of

Madame Delphine and said good-bye, going, as the good lady feared, to reap the harvest of the seven deadly sins.

Her purpose was not quite so radical, however. She had been in correspondence for some weeks with Madame Charpentier, the wife of the French Consul in London, a family friend of the Beaudais before political distinction had blown down from Paris upon her husband. Madame Charpentier was more than willing to strengthen her social leverage in the British capital by the companionship of a girl as young and beautiful as 'Toinette, and was urgent in the invitation to her dear young friend to come for a visit "to continue as long as you find us agreeable."

It was in acceptance of this invitation that 'Toinette quitted her cousin, after giving to Jean Copan a purse of gold pieces, with the recommendation that he take counsel of Irma how to save or spend them.

"Ten francs for every hole in her face!" Jean exclaimed joyously, as he weighed the golden hoard in his large hand. "I would have done it for a quarter of the money, ma'mselle. There are girls with better faces who are worse than Irma to come into a man's house; that I know well enough. Foul meat is made good by going through the fire. It shall not be my fault if Irma is not Madame Copan before the next church fête."

'Toinette, though assured by Madame Charpentier that London is London only in the late spring and cool summer, entered gratefully into the congenial distractions of the new life. Before the term of weeks to which she had insistently limited her visit had come to an end, she felt a keen interest in the people who seemed to have a kindly feeling for her. The English were not as impossible as she had imagined them to be. They thawed agreeably under her smiles. British insularism loses something of its awkward frigidity under the spell of feminine charms like those of Mademoiselle Beaudais, and 'Toinette's influence was not long confined to the consular sphere. Some yearnings there were for the soil and sun of France, but her self-imposed exile was not without its compensations, and she very readily compromised with Madame Charpentier to prolong her stay indefinitely as a "paying guest," inasmuch as she refused to accept hospitality on less independent terms. Expeditions into the country, weeks at Brighton and other sea-coast places, a week here and there in quaint towns and hamlets, gave 'Toinette new and delightful impressions of "*les anglais*," and corrected some of the faults of prejudice. The unaccustomed conditions, the social activities helped her to a readjustment of her moral balance and she began once more to experience that *joie de vivre* which seemed to have abandoned her.

XV.

IT was not until a change of ministry brought the Baron de Noel to London as Naval Attache of the French Embassy, that 'Toinette was troubled with doubt of her wisdom in leaving the self-effacing, routine dulness of Madame Delphine's farm. The young diplomat made her painfully self-conscious through the quickening of an emotion of which she thought her heart no longer capable. They met at one of the Embassy receptions, and it required no great intelligence to divine the spring of the Baron's attentions during the evening, nor to interpret his motive in begging the privilege of calling on Madame Charpentier. The Baron became assiduous in his attentions, and 'Toinette shrank from the consciousness that they became more and more welcome to her.

Madame Charpentier, who was enchanted with the prospects of a match which she thought highly advantageous to both contracting parties, bubbled with satisfaction in her officious encouragement of the intimacy. 'Toinette grew morbid in the proportion of her increasing regard for the Baron. She was tormented by the persistent thought that it

was her necessity to terminate a friendship that must yield only Dead Sea fruit in the sequel. It was not in her nature to marry an honourable man who sought her in ignorance of what she had been and done; and the idea of confessing herself to the Baron was revolting. She could not nerve herself to a decisive step, however, and, though she managed to prevent the Baron making an open avowal of his sentiments, she could not deny herself the bitter happiness of receiving him in the company of Madame Charpentier.

Baron de Noel was not a man of inexhaustible patience, and the time came when he determined to know the result of his sentimental diplomacy. He sent a carefully worded note from his hotel to inform Mademoiselle Beudais that he should do himself the honour to call that evening with the purpose to have her answer to a question which involved the happiness and well-being of his future, personal and professional. 'Toinette was overwhelmed, though she had lived in daily anticipation of the inevitable overture. The conflict of her emotions made her powerless to decide promptly on her course of action, though she had clearly arranged what to do in a hundred deliberate surveys of her situation. The temptation to accept the Baron and trust to fate for the happy issue strove hard to beat down her moral attitude and her sense of what was due to the man. Battling with her-

self, clinging to the passion of life while attempting to compromise with conscience, she flung herself down by her bed and buried her face in the pillow.

Madame Charpentier came into the room and, fearing that she had intruded upon the prayerful devotions of her kneeling friend, was about to retire discreetly, when a smothered sob corrected her impression. In an instant the sympathetic lady was down on her knees, with her arm consolingly about the dear 'Toinette.

What was the matter?

'Toinette, without lifting her head handed the Baron's note to Madame.

"What! a proposal! And you weep in the joy of it! I understand; though I did not weep when Adolphe had the good sense to choose me! I laughed in his face when they brought me in to present him. I advise you to do the same. If you begin in tears, you are like to go on in tears. Never let a man think he has dominion over you. They make very good friends, but they are abominable masters. Start as you would continue. He must think your acceptance a grace, a condescension. You marry him not because there are no other men that please you, but because he suits your convenience. Preserve your superiority; that is the way to ensure his devotion. And he is coming this evening; rise, my sweet 'Toinette! I must embrace you."

"Yes, embrace me," said 'Toinette, rising, "that our tears may mingle, for I shall not marry him."

"Not marry him!" cried Madame Charpentier, aghast. "Not marry so desirable a parti! When I know that you love him to distraction! What nonsense is this?"

"I cannot marry him."

"Why?"

"I shall never marry anyone."

"Ah! I know what that means. You will be a Baroness before the year ends. You are coquette, my dear. I see you know how to manage. It is well to keep them on tenterhooks. It destroys their absurd self-confidence. An excellent precaution. Yes; we shall put him off to-night; to-morrow he will be the more ardent."

"I shall see him to-night for the last time. I shall quit London to-morrow."

"As if he would not follow you! Why, he is mad for you. He will have you whether you will or no. Where will you go?"

"Where he cannot find me."

"How ridiculous! As if it were possible to hide a face like yours from the eyes of a man in love with it. He would find you in Tophet."

"He will not seek me."

"Not seek you! What can prevent him?"

"What I have to tell him."

"What is that?"

"I cannot tell you."

"Another man?"

"No. I love de Noel."

Madame Charpentier, throwing off her momentary apprehension, laughed merrily.

"You will, perhaps, tell him that?"

"Yes; I shall tell him that."

"And after that he will fling out of the room in a rage and swear a great oath never to see you again!"

Madame Charpentier laughed afresh over her fancy, and pulled at 'Toinette's ear, styling her "my little cabbage," and like oddities of French endearment, and, taking no further account of the mood she misunderstood, bustled out of the room to order in flowers for the evening.

XVI

THE Baron arrived promptly at the appointed time, and had a half-hour of cheerfully preparatory conversation with Madame Charpentier before 'Toinette came in.

"I do not say that 'Toinette will have you," Madame Charpentier had declared, with an arch glance meant to contradict her words. "But as she has neither parents nor near relatives to stand between you, you are not fit for the career you have mapped out for yourself if you do not persuade her to your way of thinking."

'Toinette was long in coming, and when she entered the room there was an expression in her pale face that troubled the Baron.

"You are prepared for my visit, Mademoiselle?" he said half enquiringly, after greeting her.

"Yes, monsieur, I am prepared to give you my answer, if"—looking significantly at Madame Charpentier—"if I may speak with you alone."

"It isn't proper," said Madame Charpentier, smilingly, as she moved toward the door. "It violates all the conventions—but as we are in England I suppose it does not matter; everything is so

original here. I hope, however, that you will not forget me altogether. You will call me in again, will you not?"

She went out good-humouredly, taking the affirmation for granted.

'Toinette allowed herself no time for faltering. She had nerved herself for an ordeal, and she hastened to enter upon it. She took the chair the Baron moved into place for her and, sitting with her hands clasped, as if she drew strength from their tight pressure, she began abruptly and hurried on unmindful of the Baron's interruptions.

"You wish me to be your wife. I cannot. It is not because I do not love you, for I do. I love you with all my soul. If I were the woman you think I am, I should be proud of the honour, grateful for the happiness of putting my hand in yours and giving myself to you utterly. But if you were to clasp my hand in that way, you would feel the burn of the scar in my palm. Look. Does it tell you anything. Does it tell you that it is a brand of Cain? Can you read in it the story of an assassin?"

De Noel recoiled a little and stared at her dumfoundedly. She drew back her hand and clenched it with the other, and went on with her confession. She plunged into the history of the liaison with "M. Martin," speaking more impetuously, more feverishly as she progressed, fearing that her pur-

pose might give way before she should come to the final horror that was to close this man's heart against her, quite emptied of its love. She made no excuses for herself; she offered no extenuating plea, but recounted the incidents and circumstances with the desperate frankness of one already hopelessly condemned. Sometimes emotion got the better of her in spite of herself, but she only faltered. There were no tears, no breakdown.

De Noel listened eagerly, silently. The expression of dismay which her first words produced wore away as the story unfolded, and the flush of suppressed excitement came into his cheeks and sparkled in his eyes as she told of the pretended marriage, the clandestine life in Paris, the alteration in "M. Martin," the awakening doubts and anxieties in her own mind. And when she came to the evening in which she made the discovery that "M. Martin" was, in truth, Judge Chartier, and repeated the cynical speech with which Chartier had mocked her shame and humiliation, de Noel struck the arm of his chair a violent blow as he rose to his feet, exclaiming vehemently:

"You should have killed him! You should have killed the scoundrel!"

"Would to God I had not!" moaned 'Toinette. "I had no thought of doing it! It happened! It was not in my mind, the good God knows! But he came toward me. He caught me in his arms and

crushed me against him. The terror of it filled me. I thought I was putting out my hands to repel him, to thrust him from me! I do not know how it came about, but presently I saw him lying at my feet, so still that I forgot myself in a great fear, and fell upon my knees to rouse him to life again. It is all clear to me now, but then it was as if my mind had gone from me. I only knew that I had killed him, and the dread of it took hold of me, and I fled."

"But you are free from it now!" interrupted de Noel. "All the infamy of it is buried in the grave with him. No danger threatens you now from which I will not defend you. Give me that right. You are blameless, a martyr in my eyes. Be my wife, my honoured wife, and I will guard you. If I loved you before, I reverence you now. You shall be my wife!"

"No," said 'Toinette. "You pity me. You are a man above all others, and it is your chivalry, your compassion, that speaks. There would come a time when your reason would speak, and then——"

"It is my reason speaks now, 'Toinette—my reason and my heart in one. I know myself—I know you. I love you. We are two against all the world. The secret which we will guard together shall be a holy bond between us. I share it with you. It magnifies your worth in my eyes.

It makes you sacred in my esteem. Put your hand in mine. I choose you from among other women. My life shall be one of devotion to you. We will put the past out of our remembrance. It shall be a thing utterly forgotten; even the ghost of it shall not trouble us, for there is no one can turn the shadow of it upon our lives."

"Yes; there are two besides you who know my story." And she told him of Levignet and Madame Clifton.

"This M. Levignet is your friend, and the woman dare not be your enemy. Come. I claim the right to stand beside you—I beg my happiness at your hands. Be generous to me. Consider. If nothing is to trouble the serenity of your life, why should not the man you confess to loving share that peace and tranquillity with you? If there are perils in your way, who may better shield you from them or confront them with you than the man who loves and honours you? Come what may, you are part and parcel of my life, or life is nothing to me. If you do not wish to wrong us both, if you do not wish to sacrifice the possibilities open to us both, be my wife. I hold out my hand to you to help you and be helped; trust your hand to its clasp. I love you. I love you."

"Toinette, unprepared for this result of her confession, had given way to feeling, and the tears were falling between the fingers of her hands as she

leaned forward hiding her face in them. De Noel raised her head and took her hands in his, lifting them to his lips and kissing them. She made no resistance, and he seemed even to feel an answering pressure as he held her hands tremulous in his own.

"Let love lead us, 'Toinette. Consent."

"I dare not, for your sake. It would be the saddest of mistakes."

"It would be the wisest thing possible. It would give purpose to both our lives."

"You are tempting me to your ruin."

"I am persuading you to befriend me."

"If I should believe you and some time in a mad moment, this cry which I always hear in my soul, should rush to my lips and I should obey the impulse to run to the magistracy and call out to them 'Judge Chartier did not die as you think! I am his assassin! It was I who killed him! Take me! Do to me what you will'?"

"I would be by your side."

"To suffer shame with me. To be dishonoured! To be dragged to prison for hiding my crime!"

"No; to vindicate you before the law and the world; to shelter you in my arms; to bear you home again, exonerated."

"You think that now, because you are here with me and you pity me. But when you have left me;

when you have thought calmly, you will know that I am right—that it is impossible.”

“Try me.”

“No; for you are a man to hold to your word against your convictions. You would keep faith to your own sacrifice.”

“Oh, you shall not cheat yourself and me with such reasoning. We are not children. You have drunk wisdom from bitterness; I have not travelled blindfold through the world. We know our own minds. Let us shape our lives by the knowledge that is in us, without concern for the world about us—the world that is only a mockery and an illusion if love be counted out. Trust me. I do not love you for to-day and to-morrow; I have taken you into my heart forever. You are mine; I will have you.”

She had risen, and was going toward the door, afraid of his persuasion and murmuring her fears, but he put his arm about her, detaining her.

“I will not let you go,” he insisted; and when she tried, but in a half submissive way, to release herself, he bent his head and kissed her on the lips. It was an act of subjugation. She yielded herself, and clasped her arms about his neck, sighing a reproach that he took from her the strength of right-doing.

But the surrender was not unconditional. She held to the determination that he should consider

the matter free from the influence of her presence. She would go away. He should not see her until time enough had passed to allow of his calm judgment of all the possible consequences of their union. He should not bind himself to her under the control of an infatuation that might embitter his life with shameful regrets. She was firm against his protestations. She would have her way, for his sake; and, unable to change her resolution, he unwillingly acquiesced in her plan.

She was to go away from him for a year, during which time there was to be no communication between them, and he should not know where she had gone. At the year's end she would write to him, but only to send her address. If he came for her, she would be his wife. If he did not come, she would know that he had made the wiser decision.

"I have made the wise decision already," said de Noel. "One year or ten will not change my mind. I agree to what you propose only because you will have it so. For myself, I am sacrificing to a vain scruple a year of happiness that I shall always regret."

XVII

TOINETTE went back to the mental aridness of Madame Delphine's little domain. She went courageously, in the belief that she was shutting herself in forever from the great world; that her life thenceforth was to be one of adaptation to the lean piety of shrivelled minds that imagined they did God's will in closing their eyes to the sweetness and loveliness of His creation. She schooled herself to meet what she thought to be the inevitable outcome of this probation.

With the inconsistency of the emotion that hungers for what it does not hope to receive, she convinced herself that de Noel's consent to the separation upon which she had insisted was prophetic of his final decision. Had he indeed loved her, she argued piteously fearful, he would not have let her go under such hard conditions! How could his suddenly conceived passion for her endure through a year's silent impoverishment? Hers was a woman's love, the very sum and essence of her life; his love was but the temporary pause of a man's wayward fancy. She would remember and hunger on unsatisfied till the stars were old and dim in the heavens. He would dream idly of a phantasm and wake to a new reality. It was the way of men.

Knowing the fashion of life, one could but shape one's self to the pattern. When the shell is empty on the sea-shore, it may only echo the murmur of the waves that toss or cradle it, or come to rest under the gathering sands that choke its emptiness and hush its murmurings. That was to be her fate;—only, the sands beneath which Madame Delphine, and the fatuous good curé, and Jean with his wife Irma, and now 'Toinette herself, were being stifled were the dry drifts blown from the hollows of a sucked-up and vanished sea.

Women are fantastic logicians; otherwise it would be incomprehensible that 'Toinette, eating her heart out with longing, still faltered and bargained with de Noel when he came post haste down to her at the year's end and demanded the fulfilment of her promise. She revoked her promise on the feminine ground that she had not believed that he would ever call upon her to redeem it! Her arguments in support of her position were none the less determined for his exposition of their fatuity. In the slow-dragging months she had convinced herself that his love was the fever of an hour. She had got so used, she said, to the idea that his better judgment would close his heart against her, that his coming had found her unready! She had gone over the ground so many times to the one conclusion that it seemed to her now as if his coming were only an honourably en-

forced obedience to her summons! She had sent for him! He had come! Well, the duty of each to the other was done. He knew now where she made her home. He must go from her for another six months or year, and again there must be silence between them. She would not send for him the second time. If he came, it would be voluntarily and then she could believe that mind and heart sanctioned his coming! He pleaded in vain that she would hold by the original compact. She was afraid of him—of herself. She dared not yield to him. If he could not wait yet another term it was better for her now to say good-bye! But de Noel had in him the stuff of a Jacob. Six months or seven years and again seven years he would have waited for the Rachael on whom he had set his affection. He entered into the second arrangement as he had entered into the first, certainly not cheerfully, and decidedly not without objection to the futile waste of time, but with indulgence. After all, fasting is the best appetiser, and hope deferred is the multiplication of love.

De Noel needed no one to remind him when the six months were up. He marked the procession of the days by his pulse beats; and no doubt 'Toinette had an equally delicate chronograph, for, as de Noel climbed the winding hill-path that made a short cut through the wood to Madame Delphine's farmhouse, 'Toinette, her hair free of the cotton

bonnet, and, garnished with a rose, came down the slope to meet him. At this point in his narrative Levignet stopped short with a sigh, snapped his fingers and addressed the cabby.

"Turn your beast about, and drive back. I had forgotten, my dear Summerville, that I promised a leaderette on to-day's debate. If you don't mind my smoking my cigar in silence, I will have my article all but written before we reach my office. I can dictate it in five minutes, and we will have a look in at Maxime's, if you like."

"Willingly. But before you immerse yourself in a political editorial, suppose you give me the finishing touch to the story."

"Finishing touch, Summerville! Good heavens! What kind of an imagination have you? Have I not told you that I dined this evening with the Baron and Baroness de Noel? Leave me in peace to compose my leaderette."

He settled himself into the corner of the victoria and lapsed into a sort of reverie. It was hardly of the editorial character, however, unless editorials are fashioned to the humming of Offenbachian numbers. And as we entered the Place de la Concorde, he suddenly roused, and said with candid good-humour:

"I have not thought of a word for the paper! To the devil with it! I am not in the writing mood to-night. Cabby, drive to Maxime's."

XVIII

SOME days later I sailed for America, and it was during the two years of my absence that the Baroness de Noel achieved in Paris the social distinction of which I have spoken. When I returned to the French capital—in the first week of that tragically memorable season which bade fair to be one of exceptional gaiety and brilliance—'Toinette was so much a celebrity that her photographs were scarcely less numerous in the shop windows than those of the première danseuse of the opera. It is a fact not generally known or credited, perhaps, that the French surpass almost any other nation in the esteem of virtue. The appreciation is, however, rather æsthetic than moral. There is a national, one might say racial, passion with the French for excellence, and it matters not a great deal to them what may be the particular character of the surpassing achievement. As they flatter themselves with confidence in the superiority of their cooks, painters, sculptors, and litterateurs, their milliners, dressmakers, actresses and demi-mondaines, their masters of *savoir faire*, *savoir vivre*, and the numerous *savoirs* of the civilised man, so they pride themselves on the pre-eminence of their examples of feminine virtue. They

are the only people who offer prizes for virtue as they offer prizes for works of art, original inventions, feats of valour, deeds of heroism or humanity, or the output of genius. If a beautiful woman—availing herself of the immunity from orthodox penalties which society accords to youth and beauty in union—chooses to join in the Paphian refinements of the prodigal world, they smilingly acquiesce, acknowledge the rights of the individual, and applaud her according to the measure of her triumph. But if it comes into the head of a beautiful woman, with complementary wit and fortune, to shine among the exemplars of blameless conduct, no people on the earth are so ready to pay her grateful homage as the nation too generally misjudged by its frivolity.

'Toinette threw all her influence, personal and social, into the moral side of the balances; unostentatiously, without prudery or Pharisaism, partly led by that instinctive natural selection by which bee and butterfly alike dip into the honey cups of wholesome flowers and wing past the gaudy blooms that distil poison—partly guided by the clear intelligence which measures accurately the short-lived ecstasy of folly. The Cyprian, lolling in her carriage or idling in the promenade of the avenue of the Acacias, gazed upon 'Toinette, as she passed, with that peculiar smile of contempt which belies the shadow in the cheerless eyes where envy

broods. The grande dame, whose moral basis is the pride bred of a dozen generations of unsmirched womanhood, smiled and bowed in serene approval of this charming baroness who knew so well how to extract pleasure from life without suffering soil or stain in the process. In short, 'Toinette had tribute honourable to her character from all the social antitheses of the most cosmopolitan of cities.

Such is the summary of the panegyric Levignet poured into my ears as we sipped our aperitives on a famous café terrace in our first reunion. He continued to be a favoured guest at the private table of 'Toinette and de Noel, and regarded himself as an intimate of the household. Indeed, he fancied he was a sort of tutelary genius to the couple for whose coming together he rightly claimed a great deal of credit, and had got into the way of speaking of them as his children—"mes enfants." By the testimony of his hair and moustache he had years enough for the office; but love, of a mysterious sweetness, had reopened the spring of youth in his heart and the bubbling gladness of it was in his eyes and in his speech. His fifty years were an accident. Under them lay the careless vigour and joyance of twenty-five.

"You have seen 'Toinette—but you shall know her," he exclaimed. "I shall arrange for it. I will not have you think I am given to extrava-

gance. I have my enthusiasms, but I harness them with reason. When I was a deputy, they used to say that I was the one man in the Chamber who could speak passionately without losing sight of the logical sequences. When your premises are sound and your conclusions irrefutable, ardour in the exposition is a proper and desirable addition. It is that which quickens receptivity and prepares the mind for conviction. When you know 'Toinette you will not reproach me with excess—you will pity the poverty of my vocabulary. If you do not begin to write madrigals and lyrics—mon Dieu! I shall despise you. Ah! I see that you are thinking of something I remember to have said to you once. It is true, my friend. Why should I deny it? That one flower in my heart's garden has expanded so wonderfully that sometimes I seem about to suffocate with the fragrance of it. I need to open the windows of my soul once in a while to let out a little of its perfume. I should go mad could I not speak freely to someone. You are my safety-valve."

"And does she not suspect?" I ventured to ask.

For answer, he struck a match and extended his arm to hold the flame in a direct ray of the full sunshine.

"Do you see the blaze of the match?" he asked.

"Not very well," I said, catching his meaning; "but I think it has gone out."

He drew back the match, and relighted his cigar with it. He did not offer to explain his allegory, but I was not too dull to understand. 'Toinette was the clear sunshine in which a thousand artificial lights might burn unseen.

Levignet smoked in silence for a time. Presently he touched my arm. "Look there," he said with a cynical smile. He half pointed to one in the string of carriages on the way to the Bois. "Do you know the lady in blue, with the blonde beauty beside her?"

"No. Who is it?"

"Madame Clifton. Is not that face the aegis of all the virtues?"

"An excellent counterfeit, at any rate. You have not yet found occasion for your decisive tilt?"

"I am beginning to despair of it. She is the very devil of artfulness. I have odds and ends enough of string to strangle her, but I cannot succeed in tying them together. I have set snares and dug pitfalls by the dozen, any one of them a masterpiece of invention for entrapping the ordinary adventuress of her class; but my old confederate, Chance, has refused to serve me thus far, and she is too clever for my unaided wits. An extraordinary woman, I assure you. Most extraordinary. My admiration of her is prodigious. I would rather conduct her before the Criminal tribunal

than be myself borne to the Élysée Palace as President of the Republic. But one eventuality is as probable as the other, I fear. And yet I have an absurd belief that I shall see the tragic end of Madame Clifton's career in Paris. It is a great mistake, however, to suppose that retribution is always on the alert to seize and confound the guilty. Nemesis is as capricious as Fortuna. It is the feminine temperament. The English Shakespeare says that Jove laughs at lovers' perjuries, and I am not sure that he does not laugh at most of our notions of right and wrong. It is all the same, though.

"That girl you saw with Madame Clifton just now is Mademoiselle Dupont, whose father made a fortune in leather and quadrupled it in the banking business. The girl is ambitious, but has no social position to start with. Benevolent Madame Clifton becomes her sponsor in baptism into the cult of fashion—an honour for which Papa Dupont pays handsomely, you may take oath. In a girl like Mademoiselle Dupont—one of vulgar origin and puffed up by the arrogance of riches (you saw the silly pride in her face)—in a girl like that, extremes meet. She desires, naturally, to gratify her pride while catering to her ambition; but, naturally, again, her ambition is greater than her pride. If she cannot walk into the charmed circle of the hedonists through the great front doors, she

will be perfectly willing to steal in by the way of the back stairs. She has her preference, presumably, of the right hand to the left hand arrangement, but is prepared for the alternative. Why do I think so? Because Madame Clifton is already throwing her at the head of a certain degenerate marquis, who is too much for even the omnivorous stomachs of your title-worshipping American parvenus. But it is not through such creatures as Mademoiselle Dupont that I shall catch the madame napping. No. I shall rather follow the clue of a morsel of paper that fell from her muff at the funeral of my friend Ribault."

"Dr. Ribault? He is dead, then?"

"Naturally, since we have buried him. He died ages ago. The winter after you left Paris. You had not heard? But he was no longer a celebrity. When one outlives one's usefulness, we quickly forget that he ever had value. Now meteors and comets are so thick in the heavens nowadays that we have no eyes even for the fixed stars, to say nothing of the slow-waning fires. There was not much about him in the papers, and probably your correspondents ignored him entirely. Yet it was he, rather than Charcot and the rest of them, who discovered the therapeutic value of hypnotism. I was to dine with Ribault the evening he was stricken down—a sort of paralysis of the heart, I believe, though I may be wrong.

Thank heaven, I know little or nothing about the human anatomy and its ailments. Whatever he had, it was not dilatory. Poor fellow; he insisted that I should be brought to him when I came. There was a bevy of doctors about him as I entered the room, and he motioned them away as he beckoned to me.

“ ‘I wish to speak with M. Levignet in private,’ he said, his voice hardly louder than a whisper.

“ ‘Ah, my dear Levignet,’ he murmured, with a smile, as he put out his hand to me when the doctors had gone. ‘You are such a gourmand that you probably will not forgive me for cheating you out of a dinner. I would have been glad to postpone this little matter until after the coffee, but I really had a prior engagement with the Gentleman who has called for me.’

“ ‘My dear, dear Ribault, is this a time to jest! I am pained to the heart to see you so ill, old friend.’

“ ‘I understand. They have told you that a priest has been sent for to come with the holy oil. It is nothing, Levignet, nothing. I have made a long journey, and am not sorry to have reached the terminus. It has been pleasant enough, as a journey—but rest is pleasant, too, my friend. I have not been a bad traveller. I am fairly free from soil and dust. What I have to confess to the priest is known to you. I have wronged no one

but Chartier, and I have made atonement to him by keeping his memory free from the stain of which we know. I must thank you for letting me have my way in that. I know how your professional pride suffered under your agreement not to bring the assassin to justice——'

" 'There was no assassin, Ribault,' I interrupted feelingly. 'There was a catastrophe, but no crime. Heaven made innocence its own accidental avenger!'

" 'Ah! It is clear. You love the woman.'

" 'Yes; I love her.'

" 'Then you are ready to serve me,' he said, an eager light in his eyes, a renewal of vigour in his tone. 'I hesitated to ask the service, for I feared it might be compromising in some way. But I want to see them, Levignet, I want to see them—you understand—Madame Chartier, Mademoiselle Chartier—Charlotte and Elise! Can you bring them to me? You are clever—ingenious—could you manage to bring them without their being compromised, without the shadow of danger to their good name? Five minutes with them before the priest is let in to shrive me would better fit my soul for Paradise than his absolution and unction. Will you undertake it? You need not fear that I will die before they come. Death is not stronger than love that waits expectant. Go for them, Levignet. Charlotte will come, I know;—maybe

she will not think it unwise to let—my daughter come, too.'

"There was a world of winning pathos in the way he said 'my daughter.'

"I have not many emotions, my dear Summer-ville. But there is something within me which I do not recognise as myself. This something bade me bend to kiss his cheeks, and a tear fell on his forehead.

"'You shall see them,' I said, rising, '*Au revoir*, old friend.'

"He held out his hand to me, his face luminous with a smile that chilled me prophetically.

"'Not *au revoir* for me, Levignet. Adieu!'

"'Adieu!'

"As I clasped his hand, he drew me toward him, and as I stooped he kissed my cheek as I had kissed his.

"'Once more, adieu.'

"'Adieu!'

"I left him, his final 'adieu' coming to my ears in a whisper as I passed through the door."

XIX

THERE was but one of the several doctors waiting in the next room, the others having gone, aware of their uselessness. I explained to this doctor that the dying man had long ago been intrusted by the late Judge Chartier with a piece of private information which it was now important should be communicated to Madame and Mademoiselle Chartier, and that I was going to fetch them. A simple lie is much more credible than a complex truth. The doctor knew that Ribault had been the family physician of the Chartiers; he took it as a matter of course that there had been professional secrets which the time had come to divulge. I drove to Madame Chartier, who hardly waited to learn the object of my call before summoning her daughter; and in less than five minutes we were in the closed cab going with all possible speed toward the death-bed. I do not know what passed between the three in the brief interval before Madame Chartier and her daughter reappeared, weeping, and implored the priest, waiting in the ante-room, to hasten to the bedside; but, as there was no postponement of the wedding of Mademoiselle Char-

tier, already announced for the ensuing week, it is probable that she was not told the secret of her parentage. I wonder if a conscious filial caress would have been a light to his soul as it went down into the Valley of the Shadow?

"I have some theories of my own as to the relations between the seen and the unseen, the known and the unknown, matter and thought; mad fancies, I dare say, but interesting guests which my mind delights to entertain. If you are willing to be bored for an hour or two some day, I will prove to you, by a thoroughly uncontrovertible but heterodox syllogism, that you and I and Elohim are one and inseparable; and that the only reality is Thought.'

"Quite willing, Levignet," I said, smiling at him; "but what has this highly metaphysical flourish to do with Dr. Ribault and his daughter?"

"Nothing," he answered carelessly, as he dusted the ash from his trousers and rose from the table. "Only, we have made so many fetiches and scarecrows with which to terrify ourselves that we have lost all sense of proportions and values, to say nothing of absolute relations. We have made Death the King of Terrors, and we pale and tremble at the very name of him. We imagine that he leads us down into a region of horror and desolation; that he cheats us of present joys and threatens us with penalties for our human frailties;

that this very creature of our own thought is the master of our Destiny. We are such asses, Summerville! We are such asses!" He smoked in reflective silence a moment and then resumed his narrative.

"When I went into the room with the others, after the priest had given him passports to Elysium, Ribault lay still and silent, his eyes closed, a smile on his lips. I touched my fingers to his forehead. It was already cold. But the smile fascinated me. I suppose the others saw in it the testimony of the soul's tranquillity, the perfect peace of its departure. To my fancy it was the imprint of a superb mockery. It was as if he were laughing at us. This thing we call Death is the grand *farceur* in the travesty of life with which man at once transports and torments himself. We shall all laugh when the final curtain is rung down, and go about our serious business of Being. While the show is on, let us cackle at the jests, applaud the heroics, shudder at the calamities, and weep over the misadventures as becomes the patron of the play who pays for his place. So go your way to your hotel, my friend, and put on your evening clothes, that we may dine together like Christians. I shall join you at seven."

XX

INSTEAD of coming at the appointed hour to dine with me, Levignet sent a *carte pneumatique* to excuse himself, promising an early explanation of "one of those caprices which I have grown too wise to disregard." Though disappointed, I had no doubt that 'Toinette was responsible for my having to eat in solitude—for I had no mind for other company than Levignet's with which to discuss a particular dish I had ordered to excite his loquacity. It is a mistake to imagine that wine is the tongue's supreme laxative. A well-cooked novelty will often do more than the choicest vintage toward subduing the carnal and liberating the wit. I remember a dinner party in London, at which the fountain source of the evening's jollity was the delicious succulence of an American corn fritter; and any barmecide who has sat with Titmarsh in a snug corner of the "Café Trois Frères" knows the inspirational properties of a choice, gravy-coddled beefsteak. By the time I rang for the waiter to clear the table, my temper was of a benevolence to enfold the lean soul of my enemy, and I even contemplated the "promenade" of the Casino as the possible scene of a half-hour's amusement

I went to take my coffee on the terrace of the Café de la Paix, the axis of worldly humanity, pretty sure of sighting in the seated or passing crowd a familiar face—possibly one I had last seen on the other side of the globe. I was not prepared, however, to see Levignet himself, accompanied by a thin *petit maitre*, of lewdly dissipated countenance, come sauntering along as if broken engagements were the spring of perfect self-content. Having an inside place, I stood up as he approached, the easier to attract his attention. I spoke his name as he came opposite me. He turned his head in my direction, favoured me with a casual glance of inquiry, and passed on without a sign of recognition. Thinking he might have been too preoccupied to identify me, and not caring to make myself heard by bellowing, I put a coin down on the table, deferentially made my way between the sitters, and followed Levignet and his companion. They were going in the direction of the Opera, and I overtook them only as they were turning into the rue Scribe.

“So, Levignet! I have a crow to pick with you!”

“Ah! it is you, Summerville! I have had an odd impression of you for some moments, as if I had just seen you.”

“So you had. You gave me the ‘haughty stare’ as you passed the Café.”

He laughed at the touch of slang.

"That accounts for the impression. My eyes took a snapshot of you while my mind was busy with other matters, and my brain was beginning to develop the negative. I am inclined to think we get quite one-half our original thoughts and fancies in that way." Then, lowering his voice, he added, "I want to introduce you to the Marquis de Fonteville, the blackguard I spoke to you about this afternoon."

The Marquis had strolled on when Levignet stopped to shake hands with me, and was now a few steps in advance. We overtook him, and Levignet presented me, bestowing upon me the borrowed distinction of an American Cræsus.

The Marquis bowed very ceremoniously, put up a jewelled hand to lift his hat, and declared himself enchanted to make the acquaintance of "M. Soo-mair-veel." I, in my turn, declared the honour I felt it to be to meet this popinjay residuum of time's chemical reduction of a family celebrated in the militant history of old France. A direct ancestor of this moral and intellectual bankrupt, this ninnyhammer redolent of vicious refinement, was a glorious rival of the great Condé in buttressing the throne of the Louis! I saw in the lamp-light the cynical smile under Levignet's moustache, as he expressed the hope that the Marquis would find me worthy of his condescension.

"Well, monsieur?" said the Marquis, with an inquiring look at Levignet that supplemented his words.

Levignet shrugged his shoulders, and looked sidewise at the Marquis as he gave a twist of his moustache, which I knew to be a sign of his uncertainty.

"I can answer for the discretion of my friend," he began; "but, if you think there could be an objection——"

"My dear M. Levignet," I interrupted, "you cannot suppose that I would presume to——"

"Oh, as for that," said the Marquis, suavely, interrupting in his turn, "I have no doubt at all that M. Soo-mair-veel would be a pleasant and welcome addition to the party, if we may have the honour of his company."

"It is most gracious of you to say so, Marquis; but it is probable that you and M. Levignet——"

"Not at all," said the mannikin, with a definitive wave of the hand. "I beg of you to be one of us for the evening."

I bowed my acceptance, well aware that the invitation was thus freely extended to the putative millionaire rather than to the actual "M. Soo-mair-veel."

The Marquis turned to signal one of the unnumbered landaus that wait in the rue Scribe for extra hire.

While he was so engaged, Levignet whispered in my ear:

"A loan of ten thousand francs to the little *vaurien* has secured me an opportunity. Chance befriend us, though I have no idea what is before us."

De Fonteville gave the coachman an address outside the Porte St. Maillot, beyond the Bois, and as we drove briskly along he chatted in a fatuous way, meant to be witty, I imagine, as he laughed so cheerily over his levities. Levignet encouraged him with inanities equal to his own, and we arrived at our destination the most companionable trio in the world. The house gave no exterior sign of the amusing evening upon which the Marquis repeatedly avowed we were entering, for it was a thing of sepulchral darkness, not so much as a gleam from the hall lamp relieving the front of its inhospitable grimness.

We entered by an iron gate in an arched grille, the key to which the Marquis took from his pocket, with an inept remark as to the convenience of doing without a concierge. He let us into the house himself, and when we had passed from a small vestibule into the main hall, we were in a blaze of electric light. Levignet's cry of astonishment mightily pleased our host.

"You cannot judge all things by outward appearances, M. Levignet. We who live in the

world must know how to cheat the curious. When you said to me this evening that all Paris knows how the time passes with the clients of Pleasure, did I not tell you that Pleasure had her temples of which even gossip is ignorant? My faith, if one could not nibble his pistache in unsuspected privacy once in a while, one might as well be a mummy or a signpost. Secrecy is a sauce to pleasure."

"Quite true," Levignet assented. "If we were to practise our vices as openly as we parade our virtues, life would be as dry and monotonous as a Sahara. The fascination of our so-called immoralities is the darkness that envelops them!"

"My exact opinion, M. Levignet. Should our government offer a prize for the vices as it does for the virtues, I doubt if there would be a dozen competitors for it in all France, after the first generation. Breaking the conventions and evading the laws of society are the only reliefs from the tedium of existence."

We had given our hats to a footman and were mounting the broad velvet-carpeted stairway as the Marquis exposed his ethical theory. Someone was singing to the accompaniment of the flute and piano, and we stopped on the broad landing to listen. A very good voice, evidently well-trained.

"Do you recognise the singer?" asked the Marquis, looking from Levignet to me.

"I seem to have heard her," Levignet answered.

"Of course you have. It is Mademoiselle Faustine of the Opera."

"But the afternoon papers said she was suffering an indisposition, and could not sing to-night," I ventured to object.

"The papers are a great convenience, monsieur. Sometimes it is necessary to impose on them. Mademoiselle could not sing in public to-night because she was indisposed to slight our little reunion. Be obliging enough to come with me. I will provide you with a dress for the salon. It is a rule of our symposia that no one but the host shall participate in them undisguised. I have masks and dominoes for your service."

He led the way into a luxurious room at the end of the corridor, and after unlocking a cellaret for our benefit excused himself to go and select our masquerade dress.

XXI

WELL, Levignet," I said, when we were alone. "You seem to be on excellent terms with the gentleman whose morals you painted in such shady colours this afternoon." Levignet chuckled.

"I would be on good terms with the Old Gentleman himself, if it would serve my end. I have an object in view that justifies my intimacy with this high priest of Cotytto."

"To increase your knowledge of social progress, no doubt?"

"Possibly. Though I am pretty well informed as to the character of our social extremes, the scum at the top and the dregs at the bottom. For purposes of general investigation, I prefer the latter; there is greater diversity, more originality."

"Then you have a specific object?"

"Naturally."

"In the interest of Mademoiselle Dupont?"

"Bah! I have no interest in fools of that calibre. Nature has only one brain matrix for the females designed for prostitution, complete or special. They are all the same, from the pavement nymph in the general market to the pretentious creature who sells to a particular buyer. To

have analysed one is to have diagnosed all. There is the same minus sign in the brains of the lot of them. But the street cocotte, whose supper may depend on the success of her solicitations, is, to my mind, very much more decent and respectable than the women who wanton with the phylactery of 'Good Society' on their foreheads. No, my friend; Mademoiselle Dupont can get into the gorgeous caravan of the damned as soon as she pleases, without let or hindrance from me. My quarry is Mme. Clifton."

"You expect to find her here?"

"Hope, rather than expect. I told you that I picked up a scrap of paper which the Clifton let fall at the funeral of Dr. Ribault?"

"Yes; I remember you said something about it."

"It was a bit of a note with de Fonteville's signature. The one line that piqued me was, 'I have taken the house, and the passage is already begun.' I knew this was a clue of immense value to me as a fox-hunter, but my poor wits were set on the rack by it. To what the deuce did it refer? Devilry, of course, but devilry of what description? I have been baffled at every turn for a year. I joined the only club that has continued to tolerate the Marquis—a gambling hell of the gilded variety. I played freely and lost consistently. They found me a lamb easily to be shorn and I became popular with the scapegraces. I espe-

cially allowed the Marquis to dip into my pocket. But I got no nearer to the puppy's confidence in matters outside the club experience. I began to fear that I was throwing my money to the dogs, and of late I have kept away from my fellow profligates, turning the issue over to Chance. Chance has pursued her usual tactics. This evening, while I was in the act of shaving, preparatory to fattening my ribs at your expense, there came a ring at the street door, and Suzel announced an importunate visitor. It was the Marquis, and I had him in my dressing-room rather than keep him waiting. He hardly got through with his greetings before declaring that he had come to beg of me the trifling loan of ten thousand francs.

"I was suspicious, of course, the sum asked for being so contemptible; but I scented an opportunity, and became difficult. I assured him that I had gambled so recklessly that to advance the sum he required would trouble me, and I must have some guaranty of its early repayment.

"'Alas, that I cannot give you, monsieur. Repayment, yes! early repayment is out of the question. My affairs will be in a muddle for another six months. But I will offer you a consideration. Give me your cheque, which I must use within the hour, and I will introduce you to-night to one of the circles you have so many times hinted a desire to enter.'

“ ‘One of the arcana?’ ”

“ ‘The arcanum,’ he replied, with a leer.

“ ‘Well, on those terms I think I can fish up the money from my strong box.’ ”

“ ‘Pardon me, but the money itself might tempt me into folly. I prefer your cheque.’ ”

“ ‘This struck me as being odd, but I passed it over with a nod.

“ ‘Very well; I will write a cheque, and the moment I have entered the charmed circle, I will put it into your hand.’ ”

“ ‘You distrust me, monsieur?’ ”

“ ‘The little beggar actually stiffened into a dignity that might have done credit to one of his respectable ancestors.

“ ‘Not in the smallest degree, Marquis. But, as you know, my father extracted my fortune from chocolate, and I have the commercial instinct. I never pay for a commodity until after the delivery. It is a principle—not an indication of distrust. You might be run over by an omnibus before we reached your destination, and then I should be at the painful necessity of rifling your pockets to recover the cheque; or, what would be still more disagreeable, instruct the bank to stop payment.’ ”

“ ‘As I went on shaving while I talked, the reprobate chose to see the comical phase of the precaution, and burst out laughing.

“ ‘Word of honour, M. Levignet, your bour-

geois is ever a droll fellow. It shall be as you say. I shall return for you in the course of the hour, when I have notified the person that the money is in hand.'

"I bowed the marionette out and went on with the completion of my toilet in a curious perplexity of mind because of my inability to account for the loan and the conditions under which it was made. I don't see the drift of it now, but at least you now understand my cavalier treatment of our engagement to dine, and why I am here."

"Pardon me, Levignet; but I do not understand why you are here."

"Because I must neglect no means that may help me to entrap Madame Clifton."

"And why have you so keen a desire to catch her *flagrante*?"

"Can you ask? Do you not know that she was the accomplice of Chartier in the seduction of 'Toinette? Are you not certain that it was she who sent the sham letter on which Chartier based his argument with Madame Beudais in favour of a secret marriage? Good heavens! Summer-ville, do you think I will rest until I have had revenge? Until I have that Jezebel in my grip? Until I have set her behind the bars or driven her into the Seine?"

He spoke excitedly, a momentary passion getting the better of his habitual calm, but it was

only transitory. In the next moment he clapped me on the shoulder, and said laughingly:

"My ghost would be ashamed to show itself on the other side if I should not get the better of that woman before I quit the game."

"And you think this house——"

"Is the house of the 'passage'? Yes. Though what the 'passage' is——"

He was interrupted by the Marquis, who was followed by a servant bearing the articles for our disguise.

"It is not necessary you should be in character," he said, as the dominoes of white nun's veiling and visors of white satin were given to us. "This is the customary garb of the novice, and it is only after one has been fully inducted into the society that one is given an identity. It will be thought by the company that you are candidates for initiation, and it is understood, of course, that I vouch for your trustworthiness. May I, therefore, be pardoned for imposing on you the usual formula? You give me your word not to reveal to anyone any fact or circumstance, incident or person, with which you may become acquainted between the times of entering and quitting this house?"

We gave the required assurance.

"You must know that each member of our group has the name of the historic or traditional personage with whom he or she is supposed to be

in affinity. It will not surprise you, then, to be surrounded by famous people, and if you hear me addressed as Nero, I hope you will understand that it is in recognition of my accomplishments as a musician, poet, vocalist and sybarite rather than a testimony to my depravity—for I am the emperor of this little world of pleasure-seekers.”

“And as lavish as your prototype, by the evidences of this room,” Levignet remarked, as he glanced at the rich furnishing, and curiously prodded the walls of quilted silk. “This room seems to have been prepared with the purpose of shutting out sound.”

“Or shutting in sound,” the Marquis replied, with a dry chuckle. “Most of the rooms in the house are treated in similar fashion—thickly padded walls and double velvet hangings at the windows. Our aim is to exclude the vulgar from the slightest participation in our festivities. Not a ray of light, not the ghost of a whisper can betray to a passer-by a suggestion of life within the house when the society is assembled. Why, monsieur, you might discharge a pistol without fear of alarming the occupants of the adjoining room. This is the House of Secrecy.”

“Very useful,” said Levignet, irrelevantly.

XXII

OUR dominoes and masks put on, the Marquis conducted us to the salon, into which he ushered us with the announcement that we were two seekers after light, and excused his tardiness with the plea of his mission work.

A volley of badinage was levelled at him and us from half a hundred masked persons whose costumes were apparently borrowed from the wardrobe of heathen antiquity, sacred and profane. The general tenor of the remarks was the complaint that Nero had reduced them to starvation by his remissness, and there was an urgent demand for the belated banquet.

The Marquis drew out his watch and held the open dial to the general view.

"You see I am on time to the minute. Your appetites are not reliable time-pieces. But," he touched an electric button as he spoke, "the signal is given, and our devotions shall begin."

Then, in a lower tone, he said to Levignet:

"Monsieur, my part of the compact is fulfilled."

"And mine shall be on the instant," said Levignet, producing from under his domino a folded cheque, which he gave to the Marquis.

De Fonteville, without opening it, thanked Levignet for the cheque, and thrust it into a pocket of his waistcoat.

"You have not looked to see that it is in form," Levignet cautioned him.

"I did not win your money at the club, monsieur, without forming an opinion of your character. That I have brought you here this evening in the company of a gentleman quite unknown to me is evidence that I do not think you entirely untrustworthy."

The people were crowding out of the room, in unceremonious gaiety, but one of the women, lingering behind, approached the Marquis as he was speaking.

"Well, Nero?" she asked, the tone of her voice being at once a challenge and a threat.

"*'Requiescat in pace,'*" as the tombstones say.
"It is in my pocket."

"So much the better." She bowed and took the arm of a waiting Persian, who led her away.

"I am rather surprised," said Levignet, nonchalantly, "to find Madame Clifton in your merry assembly, Marquis."

The Marquis looked at him sharply, but the satin visor was not less communicative than the dark eyes that looked innocently through the openings.

"You are in error, monsieur."

"Possibly," Levignet assented; "but the lady who just spoke to you——"

"Pardon me, monsieur," interrupted the Marquis. "I neglected to acquaint you with one of our canons. No one is known in this society but by the name in which he or she was initiated. Who the ladies and gentlemen really are is supposed to be known only to myself. One member may suspect the identity of another, but in no circumstances is he permitted to speak of it or utter the name of the person. Certain persons, it is true, are known to each other, but for the majority our motto '*Non mi ricordo*' could be interpreted, 'I do not know.'"

"I apologise for my indiscretion, Marquis. But you will admit that you led me into it by speaking the name of the singer we heard on the stairs."

"Ah! that is another matter, monsieur. Our professional associates, exclusively feminine, have no reason to wish to conceal their identity. Each one of them is known to us all, but she knows none of us, myself always excepted, save by our membership names. It is understood, monsieur?"

"Perfectly, Marquis."

"Then, let us follow in to dinner, for they will not sit down until I am at the table."

"Now for an orgie," Levignet whispered into my ear, as we passed through the doorway.

XXIII

THE famous Caliph of Bagdad himself would have regarded with gratification the sumptuousness of the room in which the banquet was about to be served. It was furnished in bizarre Oriental style with the addition of modern luxury, and the tables were laden with a service in which gold seemed to struggle with silver for supremacy. About the tables, three round ones arranged like a clover leaf, were semi-circular seats, upholstered in morocco and furnished with silk cushions, each designed to hold two persons at a time. The lights of the room were hooded, and were just numerous enough to cast a mellow golden glow over the assembly in a way to heighten the general effect and enrich the charm of the women. The attendants were white-turbaned negroes in Turkish garb. I could not reconcile the spectacle with de Fonteville's urgent need for such a beggarly sum as ten thousand francs.

The Marquis, who had gone to unlock an en-chased box placed on a small table in a corner, took from it four or five white cards. Holding these in his hand, he turned to the company and said, with a smile that brought out all the suggestive evil of his thin, lewd face:

"I see that you were very well pleased with your last distribution at table,"—a remark that seemed to afford the company no small amusement. "There are but five requests for changes of place. I thank you for giving me so little trouble to-night. But we have two novitiates to dispose of, and I must make the rearrangement with regard to them. The younger White Domino I assign to Helen of Troy, in the hope that she will find in him another Paris. He has stature, at any rate. Ariadne may continue her search for Theseus under the guidance of the other White Domino, who, I can promise her, is a master magician in the simple art of wisdom. Clytie, who so ungenerously abandons me, shall murmur her complaints into the ear of Hercules, to whose superiority I bow; and the exacting Diana may share her fauteuil with Meleager, who, happily, does not tremble at the burning of a green firebrand, and rushes feverishly into change. That completes the readjustment and the rest of you may follow your desires; but I hope some lady will think it unbecoming that Nero should sit in loneliness."

Amid a good deal of merriment, we took our respective places, and the babel of conversation began, growing more and more animated as the courses succeeded one another and the wines were changed.

Helen of Troy was communicative and of a

lively fancy. Her throat, and the visible part of her face proclaimed her young and passing fair. Her manner was well-bred, even distinguished, and I felicitated myself on the good fortune that cast her to my lot. She early relieved my perplexity over the Marquis' private need and the munificence of our surroundings by informing me that the Society was communistic, each member contributing to the maintenance of the establishment and the provision of its pleasures. What these pleasures were, beyond feasting and drinking, she declared I might not know until I had passed from the domino to the costume degree of initiation; but intimated that the transition was an easy one, which need not be delayed beyond the evening if I chose to subscribe to the terms and penalties of fellowship.

"What are the terms and penalties?"

"For instructions on that head you must apply to Nero and Messalina."

"Messalina is the lady who sits beside Nero?"

"Oh, good heaven, no! She is among us, but not one of us. Messalina is the lady in purple at the extreme right."

She designated the person whom Levignet suspected to be Madame Clifton, and Levignet sat at an arc of the same table that gave him the opportunity to watch and listen to "Messalina," were he so inclined.

"At least you can enlighten me as to the objects of the association?"

Helen laughed, and gave me a quizzical glance from the visor-shaded eyes.

"Do you need to be enlightened? Can you not judge by what you see? Isn't there something in Latin about the foot of Hercules? Can you not imagine that our object is to eat, drink and be merry, as the wise Solomon, or whoever it was, bade us? We are Epicureans without reserve, temporarily freed from the social hypocrisies that ordinarily enslave us."

"You are not entirely free, however, since you still wear a mask."

"That is only because there is always some novice at our board of whose good faith we are not yet assured. Liberty without security is a form of bondage."

"But your disguise is not impenetrable. I should know that mouth of yours and the flash of teeth through its smiling lips, wherever I might have the pleasure of seeing them."

"You think so? Shall you be at the Élysée reception next week?"

"I have been fortunate enough to secure a card."

"Then I shall challenge you to approach me with a reminder that you dined with me to-night."

"I admit the possibility of a blunder."

"And that possibility is precisely my safeguard against your impertinence."

"But if I should take that risk? If I should come to you and say 'Mademoiselle, you have promised me a tête-à-tête,' what would you say?"

"I should look at you, monsieur, and you would apologise for your stupidity in mistaking me for another."

"And if I persisted?"

"I should walk away from you, and you would have the honour of exchanging cards with any one of a dozen gentlemen."

"Members of the association?"

"Not necessarily." She smiled piquantly as she added, "My husband, for example."

"Is there a Menelaus, then?"

"Perhaps."

"And you would appeal to him?"

"Why not? Husbands must be put to some use—or where is the good of having them?"

"Precisely. But I hope the rules of the association do not limit our acquaintance to table intercourse."

"As for that, monsieur, much depends upon the way in which you qualify as an initiate."

"And you cannot conduct my initiation?"

"Not primarily. I am a subordinate priestess."

"Messalina being the superior?"

"You have said it."

"And if I have her favour?"

"Oh, then, monsieur, you will be so much one of us that you may be trusted to pick up the glove of any lady who drops it at your feet."

"It is 'lady's choice,' then?"

"Otherwise, we might content ourselves with the limitations of conventional society."

"I have not found those limitations oppressively narrow."

"Naturally. Society is organised on the ridiculous basis of masculine prerogative. It gives the man absolute freedom in the choice of moral conduct. He may be a Lovelace, a Don Juan or a Satyr, without forfeiting his character of gentleman or missing an invitation to the salon of the most sanctimonious of our fashionable Pharisees. That is a condition from which a sensible woman must revolt. She has three ways of making her protest—by excluding herself from the society whose gaieties fascinate her in spite of her knowledge of the sham virtue upon which it rests; by entering the forum as a reformer of abuses which she knows the public has no sincere wish to correct; or by asserting her individual right to play her full part in the comedy as long as she has spirit enough to enjoy and charm enough to excite the pleasure which civilisation declares to be the chief end of life. Decidedly the latter alternative is preferable to the convent or the platform, in

the opinion of most women of active blood and alert mind. This society represents the organised revolt of womanhood as it is going on in every capital of the world. We are sowing the seed that will be the rich harvest of another generation, when there will be no sort of distinction between the privileges and liberties of the sexes."

Before I could make any reply, she raised her wine-glass and, leaning forward, spoke in a tone loud enough to dominate the hum of the general conversation.

"If it please your Imperial Majesty, the novice is forcing me into homiletics. I am in the midst of a sermon on social discords. How shall he be punished, to propitiate our deities?"

There was a burst of laughter and a general cry of "Sorbet!"

Nero rose to his feet, motioned his wine-glass toward Helen in salutation, and the two took a sip from their respective glasses.

"Sir Novice," said Nero, fixing his eyes on me, "you have been the means of betraying one of our number into a forbidden subject. The company requires you to be punished by the ordeal of the Sorbet, the humiliation of gallant manhood. Let the penitential Sorbet be given to the Novice."

His final remark was addressed to one of the turbaned attendants, who, with a mock gesture of despair, withdrew, and presently returned with an

ice that filled a distressingly large-sized glass. Nero continued to stand regarding me, while every sort of good-natured sarcasm was hurled at me by the revellers, who affected to be in pitiful sympathy with Helen.

As the ice was set in front of me, Nero bade me rise, which I did to a clapping of hands and a salvo of expletives.

"Novice," began Nero, with judicial gravity, "Heaven gave you lips red with the warmth of sensuous fire, and you profane them with the cold speech of a dead morality. We can see on them the pallor of starved desire. Let them be utterly chilled. Hold to your lips the double Sorbet, which you may not remove from them until you have consumed the last particle."

I complied smilingly with the order, but soon found the performance so far from amusing that I begged to be pardoned in the midst of it. The company was hilariously inexorable, and I completed the penalty in heroic martyrdom.

"Are your lips chilled of all sensation?" demanded Nero, as the others laughed.

"Frozen," I replied.

"Then rise, Helen."

Helen obeyed, with no other demur than a comical "Br-r-r," and an affected shiver.

"Novice, press your lips to the lady's throat."

Helen gave a cry at the touch of my lips, and

recoiled, chatteringly muffling a trifle of lace about her breast as she crouched down into the corner of our fauteuil, declaring that I had turned her into an iceberg.

The absurd incident seemed to act as a signal to the mischievous company to throw off artificial restraints, and, wine having begun to assert its authority, the feast developed into a Bacchanalia from that moment.

XXIV

LEVIGNET was, of course, right in what he said about the eternal sameness of the "feminine brain of the minus sign." Whatever the name—Delilah, Thais, Phryne, Aspasia, Chloe, Cora or Mimi; urban or rustic, shepherdess or countess, impudent Lorette or arrogant *grande dame*—it is the one type, little variant, indestructible; and the methods of the lupanar are the expedients of the boudoir.

Levignet, whom I knew to be wine-proof, became one of the noisiest and most demonstrative of the convivialists. He declaimed snatches of verse from Villon and Verlaine. He made mad jests as couples, at intervals, withdrew from the tables to sit in the remote corners or wander off, perhaps to the salon. He told humorous anecdotes in a way to excite the interest of the amatory egoists who were disposed to forget everything but their own philanderings. Helen of Troy was more attentive to him than to me, and did not scruple, after giving me a playful buffet on the cheek, to quit my side and run to a seat just vacated opposite to Levignet. Having been to market for a nightingale, I did not purpose to return with a goose, so gave chase to Helen, barely intercepting a tipsy

Roman who was about to lurch into the place beside her.

"Then you are not absolutely destitute of spirit?" she laughed.

"I do not shine in company," I admitted; "but bracketed in a cosy nook with a pretty woman I am not unimaginative. May we not follow the example of some of the others, and smoke our cigarettes under the rose?"

"What presumption you novices always have! You fancy yourself already a privileged member because you have broken bread with us and drunk yourself impudent? My dear innocent, look at your left-hand neighbour. Do you observe the curious ring on his little finger? Glance at the other gentlemen. Do you not see that each wears a similar token? You must know, then, monsieur, that no lady has private favours for any man who is not certified in that fashion. Heaven above us! Do you think we offer ourselves a prey to wolves in sheep's clothing?"

"Then I have been building Spanish castles all the evening?"

"Oh, a Spanish castle is habitable, if you wear the Lucky Cap."

"Tell me how to get possession of the Lucky Cap."

"You must grab for it in the invisible."

"The riddle of the Sphinx?"

"Which Oedipus may solve."

"Be magnanimous, and give me a clue."

"To my own possible destruction? But I will prove my fearlessness. In the first darkness, reach out your hand and clutch. Hold fast to what you grasp and in the light you will know your reward."

"Very lucid, I give you my word, Helen, and I am deeply grateful, believe me!"

She laughed at my discomfiture, declared I would deserve no more than I got if I failed to act upon her hint, and turned her attention to Levignet, who was tipsily struggling to his feet, vowing that, as Messalina had refused to laugh at his jests, he thought her the only wise one for his serious conversation.

I noticed that Messalina had risen and was standing back of the chair in which she had been seated. As Levignet unsteadily made his way toward her, she raised her hand and said sharply:

"Attention, ladies."

At once the ladies rose from their places and stepped behind their chairs, to a chorus of jocularities. Not being in the vein for a dull half hour with the men, I was on the point of rising to accompany the ladies to the salon, when, suddenly, the lights went out, leaving the room in Cimmerian blackness. There were cries and a scuffling confusion, as if the company had been thrown into a panic, but it was rather an amused than an alarmed

manifestation I fancied, and I sat back in my chair to await the return of light.

But after my momentary stupidity, the significance of Helen's words flashed into my mind, and I sprang up and clutched into the darkness back of me. My hand grasped the fold of a garment, and, holding to it, I exclaimed exultantly:

"I have you, Helen! Now for the castle in Spain!"

She moved away, but I followed, holding firmly to the garment, jostling against others, taking my share in the merry disorder that made no account of overturned furniture and the occasional sharp ring of broken crystal. I seemed to be led away from the midst of the turmoil which gradually subsided, and presently there was a silence that made me think I had been guided into a secluded room.

"At last, my beauty!"

In that moment, the lights were turned on, and blinking the sudden glare, I looked eagerly into the face of my captive, only to see the grinning ivories of one of the blackamoor attendants whose tunic I clutched.

A derisive guffaw added to my chagrin, and, looking toward the other end of the room, for I was still in the supper-room, I saw the Marquis, a solitary figure at the table, sitting back in his chair, shaking with enjoyment at my misadventure.

"So, monsieur, your preference is declared! You surrender a Helen to seize an Othello! Well, each one to his taste, and good luck to you!"

"Where are the others?" I demanded, ignoring his remarks and the cause of them.

"Ah, who shall say, monsieur! But they have left us plenty of good wine, and there are cigars to your choice. Come; sit down. Let us improve our leisure."

"And M. Levignet?" I insisted.

The monkey thumped back on the table the bottle he was lifting and the mocking smile left his lips.

"The devil! I had forgotten him! You are right. It is necessary that we look to him. He was in an uncertain condition. Come. We will search for him."

He approached a door which he opened, motioning to me to precede him. I sat down in a chair at the table and took a cigarette from one of the silver caskets.

"Pardon me, Marquis, but I never interfere with a friend. I accept your invitation to improve our leisure."

The Marquis stood hesitatingly a moment, eyeing me curiously, then closed the door and, with an "As you please, monsieur," came smilingly to take his former place at the table. But as he sat down, he said to the black attendant:

"Hussan, look about the place for the gentleman in a white domino. Help him to return here."

"I doubt if he will find M. Levignet," I said, looking quizzically at the Marquis as the servant went out.

"You do?" asked the Marquis easily, as he filled a glass for me. "Our excellent friend probably is at this moment reclining on the first sofa he came to. Our wines are old and somniferous. M. Levignet drank freely. He has not wandered far."

"Why not suppose he is in the salon with the others?"

De Fonteville held his glass against the light, and watched the sparkling play of the bubbles, an enigmatical smile on his thin lips, and spoke without seeming to address me.

"These little sprites and elves that spring up so gaily from the bottom of the glass and dart in golden globules through their rich amber world, vanish as suddenly when they reach the top as if they were phantoms. Yet they are the very substance of life itself—the spirit of the world—as substantial as the universe. Where do you think they go, monsieur, when they leap from the glass? Could you recover one of them and return it to dance once more in my wine before I drink it? Our friends of the evening are like the vanished

wine sprites. They have dispersed into invisibility. You and I, monsieur, are the only bubbles left in the glass. You would search in vain for the others. We were laggards. We are proof to each other that wine stales and flattens in the cup if we dally over it. To your health, monsieur."

We drank to each other.

"Your guests have gone, then?" I asked as I set down my glass.

"Each to his own business or pleasure, Monsieur."

"In that case, I, too, should take my leave."

"Why so, monsieur? You cannot hope to find the parallel of the Helen you let slip through your fingers."

"Why not hope to find Helen herself again?"

"Then you have the intention to join us?"

"And if I have?"

"I should be pleased to proceed to the initiation."

"The first step to which is——"

"Fifty thousand francs."

"And if one has not so much?"

"One does not join, monsieur."

"And no other qualification is necessary?"

"Oh, I do not say that, monsieur. There are other considerations, naturally; but compliance with the first requirement is in a measure the guar-

antee of ability to satisfy us in respect of the secondary demands."

"And you would accept my cheque if given now?"

"Receive, monsieur. Acceptance is rather more formal. You will pardon me, but one must be assured of a cheque's validity. Is it not so?"

"And if I do not comply with the initial requirement, I still have, in a sense, been admitted to your fellowship; and it might be feared——"

"Pardon me, monsieur. There is nothing to fear. What can you claim to know? Let us suppose—mind you, I put the case in the extreme—that you have a fancy for telling tales out of school. You might tell your friends—I do not know the amount of credit it would give you in their regard—there are two opinions of me in Paris—you might tell your friends that you had supped with the Marquis de Fonteville amid a joyous company not too observant of conventional forms. You might hazard a guess as to the character and condition of the *convives*, but you would hardly be able to designate one of them. Besides, monsieur, your friend Levignet vouched for you. An astute man is your friend Levignet, and he has the merit of being a Parisian. He is not easily mistaken in men. I cannot believe you are what we call a *bavard*; but if you are, monsieur, you are at liberty to prattle to the extent may please you. Our so-

ciety will not dissolve under your fancies. It is possible, however, that an indiscretion might involve you in a duel——”

“A French duel, Marquis,” I interrupted, not able to repress a smile, “is not a formidable adventure.”

“You think so? It is true they are often mere formalities to dispose of minor points of difference between gentlemen. But it is not necessary to take life in order to resent an affront or punish an offender. You Americans and English pretend to laugh at the form of duelling to which modern niceties have reduced us others. We French, on the other hand, can but feel a sort of mild contempt for the people who settle their questions of honour in the police court, or by the vulgar resort to fist-cuffs. At least we take the chance of a serious, perhaps fatal hurt in the defence of personal dignity; and there is, believe me, a greater sense of honourable satisfaction in forcing an apology at the point of the sword than there can be in having your opponent bound over to keep the peace or fined for assaulting you.”

“You think it wipes out an insult or an infamy if you succeed in puncturing your antagonist’s wrist with the point of a rapier?”

“Much more effectually than by puncturing his pocket by a police court process. When you abolished duelling, monsieur, you should also—to be

consistent in your claim to higher civilisation—have abolished capital punishment. The society that hangs or decapitates its so-called criminals and yet forbids gentlemen to be the guardians and vindicators of their own honour and self-respect is rather more barbarous than enlightened. If I, as an individual, have not the right to kill the man who has attempted to disgrace or dishonour me, what gives society the right to kill by 'legal' methods the more or less insane wretch who incurs its judicial hatred? For my part, I have no objection to the gibbet or the guillotine. It is of no importance to me how many men or women are executed in the course of a year. I am inclined to think, indeed, that it would be a good thing if poverty were made a capital offence. If we would substitute the guillotine for our alms houses and charitable institutions, we could very quickly solve some vexatious problems. But the affectation of virtue for having made duelling impracticable while we continue to kill men who are powerless to resist our organised, legally instituted band of murderers is, to my mind, one of the most grotesque burlesques of morality that pharisaical Christianity has invented."

I looked at the Marquis in some surprise. One would not have expected to hear anything in this vein issuing from the thin lips of the worn voluptuary who sat in smiling complacency amid the debris

of our recent orgie. What I was about to say in reply was prevented by the entrance of Hussan.

"Well?" asked the Marquis, glancing at the salaaming blackamoor, "what have you done with the gentleman?"

"I have not found him."

"Not found him! You have looked in every room?"

"Every open room."

The Marquis burst out laughing. He raised a wine glass and motioned me to imitate him.

"So, monsieur, your fellow domino was more fortunate than you. He grasped the robe of a goddess while you clung to the tunic of an imp. When we take part in a game with Caprice, we can never tell what trick the little baggage will play us. The only way to baffle her is to laugh at her pranks. Let us drink to your friend!"

"With the greatest readiness, Marquis;—to my friend and—the 'Secret Passage.'"

It was a chance shot, but it rang the bell. De Fonteville let fall his glass, the smile vanished from his lips and he rose to his feet, looking at me with a malevolent contracting of his beady eyes. I sipped my wine innocently, as if my words had had no especial significance.

"What are you pleased to mean by 'Secret Passage,' monsieur?"

"An inadvertance, Marquis. I was thinking

of the Cumaean sibyl and the dark way that wound down to her mysterious chamber. Your protonym was familiar with it, and in taking his name no doubt you have adopted his methods. What more natural than that our Nero of Paris should have his sibyl and his subterranean avenue of communication with her? "

"What are you implying, monsieur? "

"What are you inferring, Marquis? "

"Let us be frank, monsieur. Let us play with our cards on the table. Last evening, to complete a sum it was necessary I should have at a particular hour, I borrowed a small amount temporarily from M. Levignet. You are aware of that? "

"I am to some extent in M. Levignet's confidence."

"You know, then, that he made the loan conditional upon his introduction here? "

"Most men require a 'value received' in transactions of the kind."

"Exactly. When M. Levignet came here, he also had in mind the fable of the sibyl and the underground passage? "

"I believe that he has dipped into the classics."

"In short, monsieur, your friend came as a spy? "

"The word is not parliamentary, Marquis. M. Levignet is an investigator of social phenomena."

"It is too much to ask you by what suggestion

M. Levignet was led to fancy he would find here the 'passage' to a mystery?"

"When one wishes to probe the occult, Marquis, one has recourse to a sibyl, is it not so?"

"You and M. Levignet are fools, monsieur. You have employed the artifice of children. What your object was I do not take the trouble to inquire. If it was blackmail, why——"

I made a movement to rise, but the Marquis, looking beyond me, lifted his hand in a peculiar gesture. I perceived rather than heard a quick step behind me and had a flash of memory that I had seen Hussan pass me some minutes before. In the same instant I felt a sudden jar of the head.

When I recovered consciousness I found myself in a closed cab moving at a leisurely pace along an outer boulevard. After some time, collecting my thoughts, I put my head out the window and called to the *cocher*.

"Where are you going?"

The *cocher* stopped his horse and leaned over to regard me, as he said with an appreciative smile:

"Where it pleases Monsieur. I have been waiting until he was sober enough to tell me."

The dull gilding of the Invalides dome showed like bronze in the first faint glow of the sunrise. Paris is a chaste delight in the untroubled dawn, but I closed my eyes heavily as I was driven to my hotel.

XXV

HUSSAN'S friendly tap did more than the wine I had drunk or the late hours I had kept to make my bed alluring, and, being got into it with the aid of a *valet de chambre*, I gave orders that I be left undisturbed until evening. When I awoke refreshed and rang for service, my first inquiry was to learn if M. Levignet had called or sent word. Although it was then ten o'clock, there was neither card nor message from Levignet, and I fell to wondering if he, too, had been favoured with attentions similar to mine. I grew to feel so anxious about him that, as soon as I had eaten enough to appease an abominable hunger, I took a cab and drove to his residence. He was not at home and old Suzel knew nothing of his whereabouts.

The queer creature was not in the least concerned for the safety of her master, however. Her confidence in his ability to take care of himself did not permit the intrusion of worry over his absence. He might be away a week or a month in mysterious silence without affecting the calm state of mind which enabled her to say in rebuke of my own inquietude:

"Je suis tranquille, m'sieu'. Il est un sage garçon. N'allez pas vous mettre martel en tete."

I drove to Henry's for a cup of consolation, looked in at two or three of the principal cafés, made unprofitable inquiries at the newspaper office, and went moodily back to my hotel, only to find Levignet sitting complacently at a table in the smoking room, trifling with a problem in chess.

"Ah, here you are!" I exclaimed, brightening at the sight of him. "A picture of cool impudence, considering the way you left me in the lurch last night!"

"Wait a minute, my friend. I have just discovered the proper first move."

He went on with his problem in provoking self-absorption, until, with a satisfied "*C'est ça!*" he played mate to the black. Then, looking up at me:

"So you have come, *faineant!* It is an hour that I have waited for you with no better companion than these pieces, while you enjoyed yourself with folly of I know not what description!"

"The folly of seeking you in your own home, monsieur."

He laughed.

"Did you see Suzel?"

"Inevitably."

"Did she not tell you that the surest way to find

the excellent M. Levignet is to attend his coming with composure?"

"Something to that effect."

"Ah! if the world were as level-headed as old Suzel, we could dispense with many of our ridiculous institutions. But come."

He rose to his feet and locked his arm in with mine. "You have wasted so much of my time that I must spoil a capital narrative by reducing it to a synopsis. That is an affliction to a man of my temperament. The omission of a detail is a pain. You cannot strip a tree of its foliage without destroying its beauty; bare branches whipping the wind may be interesting to a lean imagination—but a rich fancy is exigent of colour. If I give you a skeleton in black and white, blame yourself. An hour ago, I should have clothed it with motley. Perhaps the Widow Cliquot might lend some grace to the conversation. Shall we have her up? Besides, you see, I carry my stick to-night. My leg has been playing antics with my temper and I am in the humour for champagne."

We went up to my room, followed presently by a waiter with the wine, and when we were comfortably established, Levignet, indifferent to my impatient curiosity, demanded that I tell him of my experiences after "the lights went out." He laughed over my capture of Hussan, and even found amusement in the incident of the assault,

thinking the entire proceeding a capital joke at my expense.

"Men who have no gift of divination," he declared, as he smilingly raised his glass to enjoy the dance of the bubbles, "must be the sport of circumstance. You should cultivate your faculties, Summerville. Every man has it in his power to become clairvoyant, if he will set about it. You must learn to see effects when causes are set in motion. While you were indulging yourself with the sensuous delights of the supper and the company, I was studying my environment, analysing the jests, interpreting the bizarre conduct of the revellers, looking into the minds of the principals. The going out of the lights did not take me by surprise. I was prepared for a fantastic termination of the affair. I had kept my eye on Messalina.

"If you were observing me, you saw that I staggered to my feet when the lady rose, and that I lurched into a position to the right of the Marquis that commanded the retreat of Messalina. The instant the lights were turned off, I understood that it was merely a trick to cheat the novices, for of course, the others were familiar enough with the place to find their way about in the dark. I gently took hold of the robe of Messalina as she passed, and quickly followed, having care not to let her feel the least restraint.

She led me through a dark corridor and not until she opened the door to a brilliantly lighted room was she aware of my presence. She made an offer to close the door again, but taking advantage of my supposed intoxication, I laughingly threw my arms about her and, in spite of her indignant protest, urged her into the room and closed the door behind us. At first she attempted to rally me on having missed the object of my choice, and advised me to hasten in pursuit of younger quarry; but when, assuring her that my palate was for thoroughly seasoned fruit, I locked the door and put the key into my pocket, Messalina fell into a fury compared with which Sarah's theatrical frenzies are tame as the effervescence of seltzer to the sparks of an electric dynamo. She made a dash for the bell-push, but I interposed in fine good humour, and bade her to indulge the whimsy of fate. The unreasoning creature snatched up from a table one of those hideous Oriental daggers which fashion has converted into paper cutters and came at me with such determined malevolence that anyone less skilled than I in the science of self-defence must have received a dangerous prick. I need not tell you that I disarmed her in the politest manner possible, offering at the same time to teach her a more artful use of the weapon. Finding herself helplessly confronted by a man who knew his *metier*, she had the good sense to change her

tactics and flung herself into a chair to laugh at the comedy.

" 'For whom do you mistake me, monsieur?' she asked banteringly, bringing the tips of her fingers together and favouring me with a provokingly engaging smile.

" 'For no one but yourself, my incomparable Messalina. And for the pleasure of a tête-à-tête with you, I would sacrifice a regiment of the incontinent beauties we had at table.'

" 'Very flattering, M. Levignet.'

" 'The simplest verity, Madame Clifton.'

" 'Since we know each other, we may remove our masks.'

" 'Mine has become annoying.'

" 'Now then,' she said, as she took off her visor, 'you can tell me what object you had in following me.'

" 'Unreservedly, madame. For the last five or six years I have known you for the most clever and audacious among the *conciliatrices* who are so important to the social activities of our modern Babylon. My admiration of the faultless manner in which you have conducted your delicate enterprises has led me to investigate your methods; but until this evening I had no idea of the superb system that has insured your success. I desire to pay homage to you.'

" 'Madame Clifton regarded me through half-

closed eyes, with an expression that would have made a less self-collected man uneasy.

“‘What do you mean by the word *conciliatrice*, monsieur?’

“‘Is it not intelligible to you, madame?’ There are many to the same purport. Suppose I say *entremetteuse*—I am fond of euphemisms. The more vulgar words do not seem to me to suit your distinction.’

“‘You take advantage of your present position to insult me in this outrageous fashion!’

“‘Does it insult you, madame, to compliment your finesse?’

“‘Do you imagine that you will quit this place without being properly chastised for your infamous conduct?’

“‘I had not taken that into consideration.’

“‘You shall suffer for it!’

“‘I decided on a bold stroke. In dealing with women, my friend, it is necessary to part company with truth. So I said to her in the easiest manner imaginable:

“‘Dear Madame Clifton, I had too great an esteem of your resourcefulness and daring to venture here without precaution. The carriage which brought me here was followed by one containing two members of the secret police. At this moment the house is surrounded. No one can pass from it unchallenged. If I do not appear to

my men at a particular hour, the house will be raided.'

"The adorable woman laughed in the most thorough enjoyment of my threat. I saw that she did not fear the consequences of a raid, and my quick mind leaped to a conclusion. I hazarded a shot which I hoped would hit the centre. It was the same you fired at the Marquis—probably in the same moment—and it had the same result. I looked narrowly at her as I said:

"'Ah! you laugh, madame, because you know, as I do, that at the first alarm of an assault on the doors to this house the ladies and gentlemen under your clever protection would hasten to escape by the secret passage which connects this house with yours——'

"Madame sprang to her feet.

"'You lie!' she screamed at me, with a return of the fury that belongs to the highest tragic genius.

"'If I do, madame,' I said suavely, 'it does not disturb the fact that your house is as carefully guarded as this in which we are now so agreeably engaged.'

"It grieves me, as I have told you before, friend Summerville, to see a criminal loss of nerve. I cannot bear to have one of my ideals shattered, and it irritated me to have Madame Clifton slump down into her chair and stare at me in a pale-faced,

frightened way, with nothing of fight left in her, gasping out:

“ ‘You mean to ruin me! Why? How have I injured you? Or what is it you hope to gain? Why have you signalled me out for attack? If it is money you want——’

“ ‘Pardon me, madame. I have so much more money than I want that I can afford to lend to your friend de Fonteville a considerable sum and ask no other repayment than this privilege of talking with you. You ask me what I am. I am an amateur, madame, in the art of criminal anthropotomy, a phrase you may not understand, as it is one of my own inventing. You ask how you have injured me. I cannot answer that question without putting myself in your power, for if you knew the motive that actuates me you would have the means of defeating my purpose. I take some spiteful pleasure in telling you that a word from you could transform me from your assailant into your defender; but, unless you can penetrate the secrets of my heart, you cannot come to the knowledge of that word. You ask me what I hope to gain—why I have signalled you out for attack. Would it not be something to my credit, madame, if I could rid Paris of one of the most unscrupulously clever priestesses of vice that has ever engaged in the work of corrupting innocence?’

“ ‘Madame Clifton had recovered something of

her normal sang-froid, and I could see that my last remark had given her the idea that I was one of those abominable agents for the promotion of public morals with which pharisaical society tricks itself. I am sorry the caricaturists have degraded the word sardonic. It is one of the most perfect descriptives in any language, and there is no other adjective so well suited to the kind of smile that embodies at once a sneer, a defiance and the admission of guilt. It was a sardonic smile that Madame Clifton bestowed upon me as she remarked:

“ ‘ You are, then, an evangelist, M. Levignet? ’

“ ‘ There is hardly a nobler mission, madame. ’

“ ‘ And you have undertaken the reformation of Paris? ’

“ ‘ The limit of a man’s life is three-score years and ten. I have already passed the meridian. ’

“ ‘ Exactly, M. Levignet. You doubtless, too, recognise the fact that the cure of evil is not in the destruction of its instruments. Suppose, for the sake of the argument, that you should hand me over to those friends of yours who are waiting outside, that they should take me to the Lazare and close up my house, how great an addition do you imagine would be made to the virtue of Paris? ’

“ ‘ I do not think we are in disagreement over that particular, madame. ’

“Of course we are not, monsieur. As a man of the world it is impossible you should view social problems invertedly, after the manner of the fanatical myope. You have, however, addressed me in offensive terms, as if I were deserving of especial reprobation. Will you oblige me by stating in what way you justify your insolence?’

“I can put it in a nutshell, madame; you use your position as a respected member of society to mask a nefarious profession.’

“Suppose that is so—which I emphatically deny—suppose for the sake of the argument, that I bring together young ladies and gentlemen who have a mind to each other’s acquaintance——’

“Say that you bring them together by art and subterfuge on the one hand, and for the price on the other.’

“Well, even if you put it that way, is my method so very different from that of the devoted mammas who have daughters to dispose of?’

“You would say, madame——’

“Good heaven! M. Levignet, why make two bites of a cherry! If you read your paper this morning you know that the Madeleine was crowded the day before to witness the ceremony by which Madame de Barbeude piously delivered her only daughter into the hands of that satyr of a Russian prince. We all know how Madame de Barbeude schemed, planned and capered to bring the affair

about, and that, too, without the least regard to the fact that the daughter was rather afraid of the beast and certainly felt no inclination to marry him. I saw a dozen smug dowagers in the church who had in similar ways made merchandise of their daughter's charms. Is not the mother who markets her daughter to a title or a fortune, and delivers her over to prostitution with a man she secretly despises, a worse sort of *entremetteuse* than the woman who only traffics in strangers to her blood? Is it worse for me to profit systematically by the play of passions that have the course of nature to excuse them than for calculating parents to subvert natural sentiments to the sordid demand of contemptible ambition?'

" 'Again, madame, I may say we are not in disagreement. If there were anything new to me in what you have said, I should make you my most admirable bow and retire overwhelmed by a sense of your superiority to many of the ladies who would pretend to abhor you, were they aware of your actual vocation. But it is not a question with me whether you are more or less culpable than others whom social convention excuses. I am not sure but, as a convenience, you fill a more important place among the agents of civilisation than does the great army of worldly mothers who make wares of the family fruits. I am not concerned with the ethics of our system. If the clergy can

wink at abominations and sanctify the works of the devil, we laymen who live for the rewards and pleasures of material life may be allowed to follow our own caprices in the choice of personal enjoyments. As a panderer to the passions of our society darlings, male and female, you would be entirely free from molestation by me. On the contrary, as I believe in the divine order, that works for the survival of the fittest, I should be inclined to endorse your office as a means to the earliest extinction of the corrupt social element which now hinders the rise of a wholesome democracy. But I view you in the personal aspect, my dear Madame Clifton. You have done me a personal injury; I am vindictive. If I am bent on your "ruin" as you put it, it is because I feel a personal resentment amounting to enmity.'

" 'In what way have I injured you.'

" 'With your permission, we will waive that question. My answer to it might seem to you quixotic. In my eyes you are a tigress that has broken into a sheepfold and come near to destroying my ewe lamb. I burn with the spirit of revenge. You see, it is not as an agent of public morals that I confront you.'

" 'And you are going to show me your hand?'

" 'Not sufficiently to let you play against it successfully.'

" 'Well, what is your intention?'

"First to inspect, with your permission, the private documents relating to your "cases," which I am certain you keep.'

"I have no such documents.'

"I cannot credit that statement. You are too practical, too business-like, not to have a secret *dossier* for each of your clients.'

"And if I have, do you imagine that I will show them to you?'

"That is my conviction.'

"You are a fool!'

"Madame Clifton rose to her feet with the imperious manner of a veritable Messalina ready to dismiss a troublesome suitor to the bow-wows.

She started toward the bell-push.

"Pardon me, madame,' I said most affably as I stepped in front of her, 'you forget that I am master of the situation.' I took out my watch. 'It lacks but three-quarters of an hour of the time appointed for my men to attack the house. You may be sure they will effect an entrance. While I entertain you here, they will not only arrest whomsoever they find, but they will ransack every desk, escritoire or cabinet that could contain a scrap of paper. It is for you to choose between this course and the alternative I propose. There is no escape from one or the other.'

"You devil!' said Madame Clifton clenching her hands and glaring at me in a thoroughly vicious

fashion. There is no denying that the creature is handsome.

“ ‘Fool or devil, madame, I am your servant. Shall we proceed to the inventory?’ ”

“ ‘Is it your intention to arrest me whether I comply with your demand or not?’ ”

“ ‘That will depend upon the measure of my success in securing what I want.’ ”

“ ‘What papers do you want?’ ”

“ ‘I must make my own selection.’ ”

“ ‘And if you do not find what you want?’ ”

“ ‘Then I shall certainly proceed to an arrest.’ ”

“ ‘That is infamous, monsieur. You threaten me equally whether I have the papers you seek or not?’ ”

“ ‘No, madame; I merely wish to warn you that it is useless to try to conceal from me the records I am sure you have.’ ”

XXVI

MADAME recognised the futility of fencing with a person so apparently secure of his position. With her elbow resting on the arm of the chair, her strong, faultless teeth gnawing her thumb-nail as a bait to her impotent rage, she glared at me in silence for some moments, taking the measure of my serenity. Finally, she said with cool discrimination:

“‘I see that you are not actuated so much by a desire to get your fingers about my throat as you are by the hope of destroying my authority over some particular person.’

“‘To an extent you are right. I always acknowledge a touch, madame.’

“‘You are willing to negotiate?’

“‘Not to the value of a sou, madame. It is one of my eccentricities never to purchase that which I can have for the taking. Pardon me, if I again remind you that you are in danger of annoyance from my fellows in the street.’

“She gave a shrug of resignation and rose to her feet.

“‘Very well, monsieur, it is your advantage. Tell me what documents you require, and I will put them into your hands.’

“ ‘ You will oblige me by allowing me to choose for myself.’

“ ‘ That I must decline to do.’

“ ‘ Dear madame, we are trifling.’

“ ‘ I refuse—positively refuse.’

“ She resumed her seat, folded her arms, eased her shoulders into the comfortable cushion of the chair and lapsed into sullen defiance. I began to fear that the game was up and felt uncommonly like a fool.

“ But I have made it a rule to lose in the same good nature with which I receive the caresses of fortune. A great part of the ills we have to suffer is the result of a too speedy surrender to what we imagine to be inevitable. Experience has taught me that the most gratifying success often attends our refusal to acknowledge a defeat. So I only smiled, bowed acquiescence to her decision, and drew a chair into a position to command the bell.

“ ‘ As you please, madame,’ I said, easily, sitting down and crossing my obdurate leg over the other. ‘ You have quite half an hour of freedom; let us employ the time amiably. If, to-morrow morning, it be my duty to appear in an inchivalrous attitude toward you, let it be with the memory of a——’

“ She interrupted me sharply, spoiling a very pretty phrase.

“ ‘There is not the slightest evidence against me, M. Levignet.’

“ ‘If that be so, madame, I shall find myself in an awkward predicament.’

“ ‘You are right, there, monsieur! The police are powerless without accusing witnesses. What will your charge amount to if you can produce no one to testify to having been victimised by me?’

“ ‘What, indeed! I am very unwilling to let my imagination dwell on the consequences of a failure to justify your arrest.’

“ ‘I know something of the law, monsieur,’ she replied to my cynicism.

“ ‘That goes without saying, dear madame, since you have given proof these many years of your ability to evade it.’

“ ‘I repeat—you cannot produce the smallest particle of evidence against me.’

“ ‘Evidence, you must admit, is not always dependent on fact. One is sometimes surprised by the adroitness with which the police manage to make bricks without straw.’

“ ‘At least two persons must testify against me before a case may be made out.’

“ ‘Give yourself no uneasiness. What the law demands the law shall have. I can confront you with all the necessary accusers.’

“ ‘Name them.’

"She flashed a vengeful look at me, ready to rend her betrayers.

" 'Pardon, but you must have the patience to take the incidents in their order. To-morrow morning you may see and name them for yourself. Your friend the Marquis de Fonteville——'

"She bounded to her feet as if discharged from the chair by a spring.

" 'Has that miserable——'

"She broke off abruptly. I was only about to make a casual remark about the marquis, but I saw that she suspected him of having played into my hands against her. It was a lucky hit and I determined to take advantage of it. I pretended to be much chagrined over my heedlessness, taking care, however, to confirm her suspicions by words.

" 'I beg of you, madame,' I said earnestly, 'not to conclude that the marquis is the instigator of my proceedings. Whatever assistance he has rendered me, I could have acted with equal certainty quite independently of him. His information has been of the smallest importance—merely substantiative, in no sense initiatory. It was with difficulty——'

" 'The wretch! the miserable beggar!' screamed madame, as she stormed up and down the room in a passion which threatened the furniture. 'That is what he meant by telling me he

could do without me! That is why, for the past month, he has failed to meet his obligation to me! He owes me fifty thousand francs, and he thinks to get out of paying it by selling me to the police! But I know how to settle with vermin of his breed! He will play the pious, will he! I'll drive him into the sewer! I'll—I'll——'

"She stopped in front of me with sudden concentration.

" 'M. Levignet, you might have threatened me till the devil came to fetch you, and I should have defied you. I am secure in my position. No one who can say a word to injure me has either the courage or the impudence to go into court in witness against me. As for documents—nothing I have can incriminate me—I only fear your courts because an exposé would spoil my business—don't flatter yourself that I have any dread of a prison. You haven't built the prison yet into which I can be locked. I am not afraid of you. I don't care who your client may be. The worst that can be said of me is that I have made it convenient for persons to follow their inclinations. My clients are only too glad to keep silent, since to speak is to confess their own infamy. But you have the power to annoy me—to injure my prospects—to rob me of social advantages—and this miserable marquis—the dog!—if I give you the documents you want, will you withdraw with your police and

leave me in peace to settle with this scorpion, de Fonteville?’

“ ‘Madame, it will give me great pleasure to stand aloof and watch the play of your genius.’

“ ‘Come, then.’

“ Madame Clifton crossed the room to one of the brocaded satin panels with which the walls were heavily wainscoted, pressed one of the rosettes, and the panel flung open. She directed me to enter, and I found myself at the head of a narrow winding staircase. Madame followed me immediately, closing the panel behind her and we descended the stairs, our way being lighted by the candle madame had brought from the room. The stairway led down to the ground floor and terminated in a small, square room that had the appearance of a cellar for bottled goods, with no other visible means of entrance or egress from the stairs. But madame lifted a bottle from one of the shelf-racks against the wall, thrust her hand into the space, pressed a spring and the next moment the series of shelves with their bottles opened like a door disclosing the entrance to a dark passage. I am not without caution and I hesitated to step into a dungeon that might, for anything I could see to the contrary, be the mouth of a bottomless pit. Madame gave a little scornful laugh, made an impertinent jest in contempt of my courage, and touched a lever. The passage was at

once flooded with electric light and, instead of a dark, chilled tunnel, I found a well-carpeted, prettily ornamented corridor, the walls of which were covered with really artistic, though not scrupulously chaste frescoes. We went along this passage, which I did not doubt was the 'secret passage' for the distance of fifty or sixty yards, and came to what seemed to be a dead wall, on which, as a part of the fresco scheme, was painted a satyr who seemed to mock us with libidinous leer. But this wall gave way to the magic of madame's touch, and after mounting stairs similar to those by which we had descended, and passing two other secret panels, we came into a charming boudoir that I saw at a glance must be madame's official cabinet. There is nothing like the pursuit of vice to sharpen ingenuity, my dear Summerville. I venture to say that there is not in all Paris a more cleverly devised system of secrecy than that which Madame Clifton has provided for the security of her aristocratic clientèle. I could not withhold from her an expression of my admiration. I gave it as my opinion that petticoats alone prevented her becoming the nonpareil of prime ministers.

" 'I should think, monsieur,' she rejoined with a misprising smile, 'that most of our ministers only laid aside petticoats during their term of office.'

"I, myself, have so indifferent a regard for the men who undertake our government, that I chose to take her statement seriously; but, as I was eager to get my fingers on the secret archives of the establishment, I refrained from saying some good things that popped into my mind, and reminded her that time was pressing us to haste.

"After again demanding of me a promise not to molest her when she had served my purpose, Madame Clifton opened what had seemed to be an integral part of the marble mantelpiece and took from the cache a considerable bundle of carefully tied papers. Giving this packet to me, she said:

" 'These papers are all endorsed on the back with the names of the persons to whom they relate, so that you will have no excuse for looking into any other than the one you are after. Take the one you want without dwelling too much on the endorsement of the others.'

" 'Madame, you may trust me not to see more than is necessary.'

"I undid the packet and began looking over the papers. Mon Dieu! my friend, what material for the front page of my paper! The revolution of '93 did not overturn France half as effectually as those neatly endorsed papers could *bouleverser* Paris under journalistic impulsion. I uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

" 'Madame,' I exclaimed in undisguised admiration, 'you hold all Paris in the palm of your hand.'

"She laughed appreciatively, but said rebukingly, 'Please confine your attention to the immediate object of your search.'

"Even as she spoke my eye lighted on the name that sent a quiver through my nerves. It suddenly, and for the first time, occurred to me that by taking the papers, I would by their very absence reveal to her the case in which I was interested. I passed by the particular paper and nervously turned over the others, while I tried to think of a plan to circumvent her. Suddenly the idea came to me. I put the papers together in a pile, and turned to look threateningly at her.

" 'Madame, the document for which I seek is not in this collection. You are trifling with me. I demand to see the others.'

" 'There are no others, I assure you, M. Levignet.'

" 'I am not to be deceived, madame,' I said, in well-simulated anger. 'There are barely ten minutes left to you in which to comply with my demand. If you delay, you will be a prisoner, and my police will find the missing documents, if we have to demolish the two buildings, brick by brick to find the hiding-place. And let me tell you, madame, that you are sadly mistaken in the as-

sumption that I have no evidence of your criminal guilt. If you go from this house in my custody you will pass the rest of your life in a prison.'

"I contrived, as I spoke, to take from my pocket the phial of chloroform, which you know I am never without, and, employing angry movements to mask my actions, I saturated my handkerchief with the liquid. When, therefore, she came hurrying after me as I went toward a window, and began earnestly protesting her good faith, I was ready for her. I threw my arm about her neck, drew her head tight against my breast and, in spite of her furious struggles, held the wet handkerchief to her mouth and nose until she was soothed into docility. I did not relax my devotion to her before I had persuaded her to the most charming complacency, and placed her decorously and comfortably on a divan. I then took up the packet of papers, wrapped it in the folds of the domino which I had removed, closed the door to the cache, set the room in order, opened the only door to the boudoir and went out. I soon found the main stairway, and went down. There was a dim light in the hall and, nodding asleep in a chair in the vestibule, was a lackey. I tried the front door, but could not open it. I roused the lackey.

"'Quick! open the door. Madame is taken suddenly ill in her boudoir. I am going for a physician. Send someone to her at once.'

"The fellow, wakened from his sleep in such an imperious manner, was confused and alarmed. Babbling some question as to the nature of madame's illness, to which I impatiently replied, he opened the door and I rushed out, bare-headed, hugging the domino in my arms, filled with the keen, exulting joy of a gamin safely escaping from the consequences of a successful prank. I flung myself, laughing, into the first cab I came upon, drove to my office and in the seclusion of my sanctum opened my precious bundle of extraordinary documents.

"Ah, Summerville! Summerville! You have imagination; you are not without sentiment. I take one of the number tremblingly in my hand. I look it through. It is all complete. The dates—the facts—two comprising letters in a dear handwriting—piteous letters—letters to fill the eyes with tears!—In a minute they are ablaze—the flames blot them into ashes—black, crisp ashes that crackle between my fingers that clutch and crumble them into nothingness! Ashes that I toss into the air, and laugh—laugh like a madman as they descend upon me, sprinkling my hair and my beard, falling about me like a black rain—through which the first light of the morning streams so that I fancy a transfiguration—a soul rising clear and pure and luminous out of the murk and deathliness! You understand! you understand, my

friend! Fill my glass—and yours. Let us drink! Ah, let us drink! You know to whom. 'Toinette! 'Toinette!"

He emptied the full glass at a gulp, and rose to his feet.

In moments of joyous enthusiasm like this, there is an indefinable beauty in Levignet's face—a spiritual something—a childish innocence, one might say, that thrills friendship into affection. I take it as an evidence of some merit in me that I loved Levignet as he stood there, the down-glow of the light making a sort of halo about his fine head as it was reflected from the mass of his whitening hair.

"I must be off! My time is too valuable to fling away on you. I have things to do."

"I congratulate you on having done with the Clifton, at any rate."

"Done with her!" Levignet exclaimed, with quick transition to passionate vehemence. "I have but begun with her. I shall not have done with her until I see her——"

He stopped in the midst of his speech, with his hand outstretched, and a singular change came over his face. A look of wonderment and horror—a fearsome, intense scrutiny, a fixity of regard like one gazing spellbound at something as dreadful as it is fascinating. It lasted but a minute, and he drew his hand over his eyes slowly, as he said

in a tone in which there was an odd mixture of awe and levity:

"Mon Dieu! how curious! Do you know, Summerville, I had a vision as vivid as reality, in which I saw Madame Clifton bound to a stake and myself holding a lighted torch to the fagots piled around her. I wonder if I would do such a thing?"

He laughed and held out his hand to me.

"Well, good-bye. Fortunately we have abolished the stake in civilised countries. You Americans have the surviving monopoly. It isn't likely that I shall have to pursue Madame Clifton to your country. I'll see you again within twenty-four hours."

I followed him into the hall, but he forbade me going down the stairs with him. As we parted, I asked the question with which my curiosity was piqued.

"Did you burn all the documents you captured?"

He laughed, and went down several steps before looking over his shoulder at me to reply cryptically:

"I could have my pick of Cabinet portfolios tomorrow if I had not lost my taste for politics."

XXVII

LEVIGNET went directly home on leaving me, and was not greatly surprised to find the carriage of de Fonteville standing in front of his door. On entering the house, he was informed by Suzel that not only de Fonteville, but Madame Clifton also was waiting to see him.

"For the first time in my life," Levignet said laughingly, in relating the matter to me, "I felt a sort of trepidation on entering my own salon. I should have welcomed either of them alone, but the two in combination promised me a bad quarter of an hour."

There is but one person in the world who would presume to charge Levignet with timidity, and that person is Levignet himself.

He advanced into the room, affably saluting his unfriendly guests in quiet enjoyment of the consciousness that he had not lost in their last encounter. Madame and the Marquis, who had been sitting at opposite ends of the room, rose as he entered.

"Do I owe the honour of this visit to the fact that you have come to return me my hat?" asked Levignet, to set the ball rolling, as he expressed it to me.

He expected an explosion, but the Marquis was

keyed to diplomatic repression and spoke by the book.

"Madame Clifton is under the impression, M. Levignet, that you charge me with having conspired with you to her injury."

"Madame Clifton does little credit to my judgment in the selection of confederates, Monsieur le Marquis," said Levignet, bowing.

"You deny that you named him as one of those who were to appear against me!" Madame Clifton interjected hotly.

"I admit that you jumped to a conclusion, madame, and that I took advantage of your mistake to further my interests. It was you who accused the Marquis of perfidy, not I."

Madame Clifton, already convinced, no doubt, by the Marquis that she had been befooled by Levignet and her own impetuous temper, was the more infuriated against Levignet for the knowledge that she had been so easily cheated.

"Let that be as it may, you brutally assaulted me, chloroformed and robbed me! We come to demand the restitution of these papers! And you shall pay for the outrage!"

"Has madame—has the Marquis," Levignet bowed from one to the other as he spoke, "sufficiently considered the matter? Does it seem likely that I will restore what I took infinite pains and much risk to secure?"

"That has been considered, monsieur," said the Marquis briefly.

"Then I assume that madame and the Marquis count on something surer than persuasion for a recovery of the property?"

"Emphatically," said Madame Clifton, in a tone suited to the word.

"The alternative to compliance on my part is force on yours, I may venture to suggest, Marquis?"

"Precisely, M. Levignet."

Levignet smiled, made an amusingly deprecatory gesture, and sat down.

"Very well, Marquis; we may as well begin with the alternative. I am quite at your disposal."

Madame Clifton spoke out sharply, imperiously.

"Gaspard!"

One of her servants, a lusty fellow dressed in the livery of a footman, stepped from a curtained corner of the room.

"Upon my word!" said Levignet, "I did not know that my salon lent itself so capitally to ambushades. Are there others, M. le Marquis?"

"One other, M. Levignet, to prevent the intrusion of your housekeeper."

"You may as well dismiss him, or call him to your service here, since it is a prime virtue of my excellent Suzel never to intrude. You propose, M. le Marquis——"

"Will you deliver up the papers you stole from madame?"

"I have not yet finished the perusal of them, Marquis."

The Marquis drew a pistol from his pocket and presented it at Levignet as Madame Clifton addressed the servant.

"Tie him in the chair, Gaspard."

"You can avoid accident by submitting quietly, monsieur," said the Marquis.

"Give yourself no concern, Marquis. I am a patron of the Gaiete. I have a taste for opera bouffe. To be trussed in my own armchair in the quiet of my own salon for the entertainment of a lady of madame's social distinction and a gentleman of the Marquis de Fonteville's august lineage, is such delightful fooling that I shall recommend it to my friend Aubert for treatment. You came remarkably well prepared for amateurs, I give you my word!"

Levignet suffered himself to be bound without resistance, and the Marquis returned the pistol to his pocket.

"It amuses you, does it!" exclaimed Madame Clifton, as Levignet continued to jest, and advanced upon him with a dog-whip in her hand. "You shall have the full benefit of the humour."

She struck him a number of sharp blows about the arms and shoulders, but as he only laughed at

her, she savagely changed her tactics and began viciously lashing his head and face, one of the blows inflicting a wound on the cheek from which the blood flowed.

"Will you not try your hand at it, Marquis?" said Levignet. "Or are you, too, only a lackey to stand idly looking on in envy of your mistress? Come; be equal to the name you use. Do something worthy of a Nero. Even the last and lowest of the de Fonteville's should not fear to strike a man bound as securely as I am."

"That is true," said the Marquis, and going up to Madame Clifton, who was panting from her exertion and fury, took the whip from her hand and struck Levignet twice over the mouth with it.

He would have struck again, but the fellow Gaspard caught his arm and snatched away the whip.

"I did not agree to that, Monsieur le Marquis," he said. "My father was M. Levignet's comrade at Sedan."

"Thank you, friend Gaspard; I shall remember you. Marquis, you owed me a trifle of money. Those two blows have wiped out that obligation and left me heavily your debtor. It is a way with the Levignets never to leave a debt unpaid."

The Marquis, instead of being further enraged by the interference of the lackey, seemed to have been brought to his senses by it. That he had

struck Levignet in a sort of unconscious frenzy was evident in his shamefacedly exculpatory words, "It was the sight of the blood"; and it was the general opinion in Paris that there was something of a de Sade in this decadent Marquis.

He turned suddenly to Madame Clifton, who stood in smiling enjoyment of Levignet's deplorable plight and said roughly:

"Let's get about our business."

They started together for the door.

"If," said Levignet indifferently, "your business is to ransack my house for those papers, it will prove a waste of your energies."

"The man is a liar by profession," exclaimed madame, urging on the Marquis, who was inclined to believe Levignet's statement.

"You can easily satisfy yourself that I do not lie. There is a telephone in my little work-room—first door to the left as you go out. Call up the Prefect of Police. Ask him if I left a sealed packet in his charge this morning."

"Bah! a trick!—a subterfuge! If he left a packet with the Prefect, that is the best of reasons why we should look for *the* packet here."

She again urged the doubtful Marquis toward the door.

"Suzel will tell you, Marquis, that this my first appearance in the house since I left it in your company. The papers are in the hands of the prefect,

together with a memorandum as to when and how he is to use them."

"Levignet," declared Madame Clifton, coming in front of him, "you may as well understand me. You are not dealing with one of your bourgeois imbeciles. You are in my power, and I'll use that power even to the extent of putting you forever out of the way, if necessary. Now, mark my words. I shall not leave this house without those papers—or you. It is past midnight. The street is deserted. There is no one but your crazy old housekeeper from whom you can hope for assistance. Very well. If you do not deliver those papers you will be gagged and put bound into my carriage and taken to my house. You know something of the conveniences there for affairs that require privacy. You will be my prisoner," then, bending down so that the lackey could not hear the final words, hissed into his ear—"until you disappear. You understand? Disappear! What is your decision?" she asked aloud, as she stood erect, regarding him with a look of malicious satisfaction.

"Madame," Levignet answered, "I have so great an opinion of your audacious cleverness that I should not presume to match my own small ability against it. Therefore, I took the precaution to fortify my weakness. I had wit enough to anticipate that you would take prompt action to avenge the slight I put upon you last night. I

could not foresee what would be your plan of reprisal, but I imagined that my life might be in danger at the hands of some miscreant who, for a few francs, would cheerfully crack my skull or perforate my breast; and I knew that my private apartments are not proof against the burglar brotherhood. So I lost no time in putting into the hands of my friend, the Prefect, the papers you graciously allowed me to take and—a moment of patience, dear madame—the memorandum of which you have not done me the honour to take account. That memorandum, Marquis,” Levignet continued, turning to de Fonteville as if the matter were of especial interest to him, “while it cannot protect me from the hand of an assassin, will certainly provide a handsome public compensation for my death. If once in every twenty-four hours, namely, at ten o’clock in the morning, I do not personally assure my friend the Prefect that my vitality still has a market value, he will break the seal of the packet and acquaint himself with its contents. The first thing that will greet his eye is a composition of my own, in which, madame,—in which, Marquis,—I have endeavoured in my imperfect way to do justice to your respective merits. I am not an artist in the literary analysis of character, but my friend the Prefect is not exigent of style if the matter be instructive.”

“I do not believe a word the shuffler has said,

Marquis; it is a poor invention to cheat us." She took hold of his arm. "Let us begin."

"But if it should be true?" objected the Marquis.

"Five minutes at the telephone will decide the point," said Levignet. "If you will bear me into the room, I will put questions to the Prefect and you yourself may receive the answers."

"You devil!" exclaimed Madame Clifton, in a burst of rage that proved how thoroughly she was convinced of the truth of Levignet's statement. "What do you intend doing with those papers?"

"Chance must be my teacher as she has ever been my friend."

"Well, then, what is the price you demand for the return of my property?"

"More, madame, than you will care to pay."

"Name the figures."

"It cannot be stated in figures."

"I think we can gain nothing by lingering here," said de Fonteville.

"Nor by taking me with you," Levignet supplemented.

De Fonteville took from his breast pocket a flexible leather letter case, and produced from it a cheque. As he unfolded it, he said,

"You gave me a cheque last night, M. Levignet."

"I did," assented Levignet.

"I received it in good faith; I regret to find it was not given in the same spirit."

"I don't understand you, Marquis."

"Payment was refused at the bank this morning, on the ground that the signature is not genuine." He held the cheque before Levignet, folded in a way to display the signature only.

"That is my signature, Marquis. I don't understand why it was questioned."

"Look at it attentively. You are sure it is quite in your usual style of writing your name to cheques?"

"Absolutely. There was some mistake. Possibly the cashier——"

"You positively identify the cheque?"

"The signature, yes; I do not see the face of the cheque."

"There is nothing wrong with the signature?"

"As I have said, Marquis, it is my signature. You need have no scruples to present it again. I assure you it will be honoured."

"Possibly," said the Marquis, with apparent unconcern, "the body of the cheque did not strike the cashier as being in your familiar hand." He held the cheque fully before Levignet's eyes.

"The handwriting is undoubtedly mine, Marquis. No, by the Virgin, it is not!" Levignet cried with sudden energy. "The cheque I gave you was for ten thousand francs. This calls for

one hundred thousand! It is a forgery—an abominable forgery!”

“Pardon me, monsieur,” said de Fonteville, coolly refolding the cheque and tucking it into a pocket of the leather case. “You have assured me of its genuineness.” He smiled, mockingly exultant.

“You had not, then, really presented it at the bank?”

“No, monsieur. I am now satisfied to make the experiment.”

“The person who tenders that cheque for payment will be arrested on the spot.”

“Naturally, if the bank be notified in time. It is necessary to provide against that, monsieur. You are bound securely enough. All that is wanting is a gag. Gaspard, hand me the scarf from that table. I think we may arrange for your silence for twelve hours or so.”

“You forget, Marquis, that if I am not at the Prefecture at ten o'clock to-morrow morning, that packet will be opened and the police will——”

“I must take that risk, monsieur.”

“Yes; we will take that risk, Monsieur Levignet,” said madame, who had listened to the conversation with an occasional chuckle, evidently divining the Marquis’ purpose more readily than Levignet was able to penetrate it.

“One word, Marquis,” urged Levignet, as the scarf was brought against his mouth.

"Our time is limited, monsieur," said the Marquis, proceeding with his task. "Sorry not to oblige you with further talk,—but the conference is over. Call Henri," he directed Gaspard, who opened the door and beckoned Henri in from the hall.

"What have you done with the old woman?"

"She is locked in her room, M. le Marquis."

"Very well. There, monsieur, I think you are secure for the night, and I hope you will have pleasant dreams. Madame, I am at your service. Gaspard, you will turn out lights and close doors after us. Good-night, Monsieur Levignet."

Madame Clifton took his arm and they went out laughing. Levignet hoped for something from Gaspard, but the fellow silently executed his orders, and with Henri followed their mistress, slamming the front door behind them, and presently the carriage rolled away, the clip-clop of the horses' feet on the asphalt seeming to mock Levignet as he listened to its gradual subsidence.

XVIII

FINDING his efforts to release himself unavailing, Levignet philosophically resigned himself to the painful waiting for deliverance. He began reviewing the incidents and talk of the past half hour, greatly out of humour with himself and humiliatingly aware that he had allowed himself, stupidly as he felt, to be beaten at every point. But he hugged as a consolation the certainty that if he could not get to the bank in time to stop payment of the forged cheque, neither could he be at the Prefecture to prevent the opening of the packet and the consequent operations of the police against Madame Clifton and the Marquis. He flattered himself that the pair had overreached themselves and were really playing into his hand after all. He laughed in spite of his present discomfiture as he thought of the care he had taken in his "composition" to make it impossible for Madame Clifton to evade the detectives by any such trick as the disguise she had assumed when she was hiding with 'Toinette to escape from the supposed danger of the Chartier affair. Fate has a droll way of working out her vengeance. The mercenary greed of the Mar-

quis was to be the means of terminating the career of Madame Clifton, and they were both stepping into the trap they had set for themselves! Levignet was beginning to enjoy his situation, notwithstanding his physical aches and pains, when a sudden flash of intelligence dispersed his rosy fancies.

"Fool that I am!" He writhed in his bonds and tried repeatedly to cry out, although the thick folds of the scarf converted the sounds into a series of frantic groans.

It was all clear to him now. The Marquis had abandoned his criminal intention of presenting the forged cheque for payment. He had been so particular in questioning Levignet as to the apparent genuineness of the signature and writing for quite another purpose! His new scheme was to forge an order on the Prefect for the delivery of the packet to bearer! There could be no doubt about that. In the morning, even to-night, the order would be presented, the Prefect, not having been instructed to the contrary, would see no good reason for ignoring the demand, which would doubtless declare that an urgent need of the packet had arisen, the documents would be surrendered, and Levignet's hold on Madame Clifton would not only be gone, but that crafty woman would discover from the missing papers in whose interest Levignet had been working! Madame's fear

would be excited. She might divine the fact that Levignet was informed of the Chartier affair and her connection with it! She might imagine that a police investigation had been instituted! To protect herself she might volunteer state's evidence, and 'Toinette would be——"

Levignet tugged fiercely, desperately at his fastenings, the arms of the stout chair cracking under his efforts, but resisting the strain. He ground his teeth into the folds of the scarf to gnaw through them; raging to think that he had suffered himself to be bound instead of grappling with his assailants; impotently cursing the folly that led him to take a jocular view of the initial incident, raging and struggling for hours as it seemed, until finally, through sheer exhaustion of mind and body, he sank into a lethargy that was succeeded by complete unconsciousness.

When he awakened, Suzel, strangely solemn and mechanical, was loosening the scarf from his mouth.

As soon as he could speak, he demanded,

"What time is it?"

"It is mid-day, monsieur," Suzel replied sullenly.

"Mid-day! Loosen me! Loosen me! Help me to the telephone. Don't wait to untie the cord. Take the knife from my pocket. Cut me free. Haste, woman! haste!"

Suzel obeyed apathetically, without hurrying, and in silence. Levignet stormed at her, but she made no reply. He thought to ask how she had escaped from her room to come to him—why she had not come sooner; but she only muttered, making no intelligible answer. When she had liberated him, she assisted him to the telephone, asking no questions, indifferent, listless. He called up the Prefect, inveighing against delay, Suzel standing motionless and mute, but regarding him steadily with a curious, indefinable expression in her dim shadowy eyes. There was a tinkle at the telephone. The Prefect? Yes. And the packet left in his charge by M. Levignet? It was delivered to the special messenger who came with M. Levignet's order four hours ago.

Levignet turned and moved away rapidly but unsteadily toward the door, stumbled over a chair and fell. Suzel helped him to his feet, expressing no sympathy, showing no concern.

"I must go at once, Suzel. Call a cab."

"Monsieur's face and clothes are covered with blood. Monsieur has not eaten."

"True. I had forgot. I'll go to my room. You can call the cab and prepare me a cup of coffee while I am getting ready."

As he came down the stairs a few minutes later, Suzel was returning from the front door with a letter just delivered by hand.

She gave the letter to Levignet, saying,
"Monsieur's coffee is ready."

Levignet opened the letter, which was unsigned, and read,

"Monsieur Levignet is informed that the stolen papers have been recovered, with the exception of one set. That exception reveals the object of the theft. The tables are turned. M. Levignet doubtless has more than a professional interest in his client, but he has made a false play, and exposed his game. Let him beware. The writer will not hesitate to speak if menaced by a word or sign. M. Levignet is fined one hundred thousand francs for his temerity."

Levignet drew a breath of relief. Though he felt a deep chagrin in his discomfiture, there was some palliation in the opinion that for the present, at least, he had nothing to apprehend from Madame Clifton that would be to the injury of 'Toinette. It at once irritated and comforted him to perceive from the letter that Madame regarded her position as being strengthened rather than impaired by the turn of affairs. A second reading of the laconic lines fixed his attention on the final sentence which he had not considered at first. He was reminded of the forged cheque, and hurried anxiously to the telephone to communicate with his bank, having a premonition that the money had

already been drawn. His fears were confirmed. The cheque had been presented and paid.

"Was there anything wrong with it?" came the inquiry.

"No—no—nothing," Levignet returned, "but stop any other cheque presented in my name until I can confer with you."

Robbed of one hundred thousand francs by an egregiously impudent forgery and afraid to denounce the crime! The sting of mortified self-esteem was more painful than the fact that he had been defrauded of so important a sum. He went into the breakfast-room the object of his own contemptuous censure, and sat down grimly to his rolls and coffee. The spirit-lamp was still burning under the coffee-pot, and before extinguishing it he held the letter to the flame, watched the paper burn, and dropped the curled cinder into a dish. He put the cap on the spirit-lamp.

"Marcel Levignet, you are a fool."

He found himself hungry. He ate with eagerness, and with his second cup of coffee half finished he rang the handbell for more rolls. As if she were in waiting for the signal, Suzel came at once into the room, but, instead of the trim house dress, her thin figure was clad in the dark stuff dress she only wore for state excursions into the street; on her head was the old-fashioned, close-fitting colourless bonnet, tied with huge ribbons of faded black,

and, grasped with both hands, she held in front of her the brown canvas bag in which she had carried her simple possessions when she came to take service with Levignet years ago.

Levignet looked at her in astonishment as she came to a standstill at the end of the table opposite to him. There was something at once pathetic and grotesque in her aspect, and Levignet could not resist a smile as he asked sympathetically,

"What is the matter, Suzel? Where are you going?"

"I do not know, monsieur. Away. That is all I know."

"Away! Some one of your relatives is ill?"

"I have no relatives, monsieur."

"Then, why are you going? You do not mean to say that you are leaving me!"

"That is it, monsieur."

"Impossible! I can't let you go, Suzel."

"It is necessary, monsieur."

"But why? Why, Suzel? You have been with me these fifteen years and I have never heard a complaint from you. You have always seemed perfectly content—happy, even;—we are quite used to each other's ways—your work is easy—your wages excellent—you have no other home! Diable! Suzel, what is the matter with you?"

"It is that I have been deceived, monsieur."

"Deceived! By whom, Suzel?"

"By monsieur."

"By me! In the name of all your saints, Suzel, has that sensible old head of yours lost its balance?"

"No, monsieur. It did not please the good Lord to take my poor mind before He broke my old heart."

"Come, Suzel. We have been friends rather than master and servant. I see you are in sorrow. Tell me your grief. Who knows? I may have a cure for it. Come; tell me what has troubled you."

"I could not make monsieur understand. I do not know how to say things. I have not the words. I am ignorant. I know nothing; I only feel."

"Say what it is in your own way, Suzel; I shall understand. I have deceived you, you say. How?"

"That is what I cannot put into words, monsieur. When I have knelt down before the little image of St. Joseph that is in my room, it is that I know the good saint in his heaven is able to set all things right with me." She hesitated, exploring the empty byways of her mind for a word to convey her meaning.

"Yes, Suzel; I know—you have confidence in the good Joseph. Eh?"

"That is it, monsieur. And it is that I had

confidence in monsieur as I have confidence in St. Joseph. I have loved the good saint because he is holy; I have loved monsieur because I thought he was the best of men—better than other men—more wise than other men—able to do with other men what it pleased him to do—very superior to other men. I was proud to be the servant of monsieur. It has pleased the good God to punish me for my pride. He has punished me, monsieur, by taking the life out of my heart.”

Levignet understood her meaning. The simple soul had judged him—had weighed him in the balance of her reverence and loyalty and found him wanting. A strange sense of unworthiness, of shame, troubled him, and he toyed with his coffee spoon, looking down, waiting for Suzel to go on.

The old woman set her canvas bag on the floor, and feeling in her pocket, drew forth a cloth purse from which she took a ten-franc piece and laid it on the table, talking, meanwhile, in a passionless, monotonous way.

“When one of the footman who came with them told me, after I had let you in, that it was your wish that I go to my room until you had need of me, I went. I did not question. It is so with me. I sat waiting till I heard the front door close and the carriage drive away. I waited yet a time; then I thought ‘He has forgotten,’ and I go to open the door. It is locked. Very well. I do not

question what monsieur does, and after a while I go to bed. In the morning, the door is not yet unlocked. I wait. After a time it is late. Very late. I have work to do. I knock on the door and call, but you do not answer. I wait yet a long time. But there are just so many hours in the day and work for each hour. I think again, he has forgotten, and gone to his business. With my scissors I unscrew the lock from the door. I come downstairs. I go into the salon. I see monsieur. Ah, God! it is as if the thunder from heaven strike me. I do not know—I think I died, monsieur. I was dead for a long time, but I saw monsieur all the time. Then I became alive again—but it is only a man tied in the chair—what I had known and loved—what I had always had in mind—I don't know——”

“Your ideal, Suzel,” said Levignet, humbly.

“Maybe that. I don't know. Something was gone. And my old heart, it was gone, too. That is why I go away, monsieur. That is why I have broken the little image of St. Joseph in my room, monsieur. But I remember it was not mine. Here are the ten francs to pay for it. Now I must go, monsieur.”

She took up her bag again and moved toward the door.

“Wait, Suzel,” said Levignet, rising and going toward her. “You are old, friendless; you have

no home but this. Let us live out our days together. If your ideal is gone, you will still find me a good master. Stay with me."

"No, monsieur. I could not. I should always see the mark of that woman's whip upon your cheek, and it would make me false to the good God at last."

"How do you know there was a whip, Suzel?"

"I found it on the floor. I have it in my bag. I shall always keep it. They shall bury it with me."

Levignet stood silent, curiously awed by this droll exhibition of humiliated loyalty, and Suzel passed out of the room, and presently the street door closed behind her.

Levignet went to pick up the ten-franc piece from the table, gazed at it long and moodily, but absently; laughed; put the coin into the locket that hung from his watch-guard, and brushed a tear from his eye. Then, going to a mirror on the wall over the fireplace, he looked at the reflection of a red weal on his cheek.

XXIX

I HAVE lived too long," Levignet declared after recounting these incidents to me as we sat in the upper verandah of a snug little tavern at Suresnes that afternoon. "A man should not outlive his wits. Egotism is the infallible sign of mental deficiency. I have become an egotist. My judgment is obscured. I have been guilty of letting bravado usurp the function of discretion. Some part of my brain is diseased—atrophied. What was it persuaded me to let them bind me in a chair? Egotism. I was so well satisfied with myself—I was so well content with the precautions I had taken, that I wished to deride them when they thought they had me at the greatest disadvantage. Egotist! Driveller! Imbecile! And she the cleverest woman in Paris!"

"You forget the Marquis' pistol."

"Pah! A thousand to one it was not loaded. If loaded, he had not the courage to fire it. That was but an ingredient of the farce."

"And the lackeys?"

"Lackeys! That!" He snapped his fingers. "Three armed Prussians have tried to make me their prisoner. They are repenting in Purgatory. It was neither the marquis, nor the lackeys, nor the pistol that triumphed over me. It was ego-

tism, I tell you, the only infection of the devil which neither Christianity nor medicine can antidote. What is left to a man when he entirely condemns himself?"

"Well, to begin with, he can toss egotism out of his mental windows."

"Hah! You think I have any left? I am as flat in the dust as a reptile that has been crushed under a hoof. I am servile to servility. When the old Suzel went out of my house she took the last shreds of my egotism to mend her own broken pride."

"As a philosopher, dear Levignet, you know that the most odious characteristic of egotism is humility. It is the anathema maranatha of Sham. You don't mean a word of what you have said. You are angry because you can hit upon no plan of action. The way you have chewed your cigar to a pulp is excellent proof that your Committee of Ways and Means is in stormy session."

"My dear Summerville," exclaimed Levignet, amused by the conceit, "you sometimes surprise me by a flash of discernment. But you are right. I shall find a way to win Suzel back. She will weep for me when I die. I can see her now lying drenched and earth-splashed on my grave." There was something strange in his voice as he said this, and his eyes were looking into the future.

He came back after a moment and continued:

"A little while ago you said I could seize the Marquis as a forger. That is true. But if I did, what then? I might recover something of my hundred thousand francs, and clap the mannikin behind the bars. But how could I do so without running the risk that *her* history would come out in the proceedings? I could invite the scoundrelly dwarf into Belgium or Swizerland to be shot at, but the dastard would decline on the ground that it is impossible he should put himself on a level with a man who has been horsewhipped by a woman. In his noble eyes I was dishonoured by the lashes Madame Clifton showered on me. He could not understand that his own part in that affair raised me above the rank of a marquis! Eh! well; what to do? What but to wait for Chance to speak? I am restless—impatient—smarting with a fire that needs to be extinguished; but—what can I? I must wait—wait!"

"It seems so. As we say in my country, the cards are stacked against you."

"You need not remind me. It is not pleasant to know that one has bungled; it is damnable when one has bungled at the expense of those he would very cheerfully die to serve. Ah! I was filled with the idea of clearing a viper from the path of a *protégée* ignorant of my guardianship. I promised my heart the joy of avenging the wrong to 'Toinette—and I have only roused the sleeping

fury—exposed her to a new danger. Name of Satan! I am maundering. Let us go for our stroll in the Bois. It is the driving hour. We may see—umph! everyone.”

“No doubt we shall get a glimpse of the Baroness.”

“I disguise nothing from you. I shall see no one but her.”

The season was well begun, and in these faultless afternoons the brilliancy of the gay scenes in the paragon of driving parks offered a cure for the most aggravated attack of doldrums. It is not in the nature of man to saunter in balmy air,—odorous with the breath of spring and the young summer in their first caress,—along avenues thronged with beaming, lovely women, in costumes to rival the delicate hues of the flowers, whose draperies exhale the perfume of rose and violet and jasmine,—and cling to his melancholy. Certainly it was not in the spirit of Levignet to keep a saturnine aspect in the face of beauty in graceful dalliance. Before we had idly promenaded half the length of the noble Avenue de Longchamps, thronged with loitering carriages and strolling or lounging bebies of men and women of the elegant monde and demi-monde, the sparkle of zest had come into his eyes and the vivacity of the *joie de vivre* into his speech. He jested and laughed, and saluted acquaintances in happy forgetfulness of mortifying disappoint-

ments and misadventures, reiterating his holiday refrain that Paris is the Elysium of earth, and, rejuvenated by mental excitement, tossed his stick into the victoria trailing after us, and walked with a step as springy as that of a newly-commissioned subaltern on dress-parade.

"After all, Summerville, '*carpe diem*' is the keynote of existence! What fools we are to plague our souls with restrospects and anticipations when the sum of everything is the passing moment! What the deuce have we to do with yesterday? Let the dead bury the dead. As for to-morrow—what doctor of the Sorbonne can give us proof that there is a to-morrow? Look at that turnout. What a pair of horses! What a jewel of a carriage! Nothing to surpass it in the drive. And the radiant creature lolling in the cushioned corner like a Cleopatra moving to the conquest of an Antony,—do you recognise her?"

"Oh, yes! Everyone knows the queen of the half-world."

"But the imbecile tried to kill herself last week. And all because the illusion of a Yesterday had spun a cobweb in her silly brain! And look at that grim-visaged woman with her brace of daughters. She is the wife of an ambassador, and so puffed with her notions of To-morrow's dependence on her that she cannot see beyond the horizon of her own rotundity. She is a greater fool than our

Cyprian. But both are comediennes in the grand burletta. We must laugh at each in her own key. What a pitiful improvidence it was that the scheme of Nature included no arrangement for the supply and replenishment of brains! Oh, bottom of Hades! That is too much!

The exclamation and brusque change of tone from levity to indignation were provoked by the passing of de Fonteville in a carriage with Madame Clifton and the blonde Mademoiselle Dupont. Had they gone past without observing Levignet it is probable he was in a humour to fling a jest into the air after them; but, as they came near, the horses ambling at a pace little better than a walk, Madame Clifton's all-surveying eye caught sight of us; she reached over and touched de Fonteville's knee to direct his attention to us.

The Marquis looked, recognised Levignet, nodded familiarly and began laughing, Madame Clifton joining him, the two keeping their jeering faces toward Levignet as they went by, he stopping to glare at them as if of a mind to leap into the carriage and throw the grimacing ape under the wheels. Their laughter was so loud and mocking that the notice of others was attracted to Levignet and, without knowing why, they tittered in the thoroughly characteristic fashion of the French, whose risibilities are not subject to the law of cause and effect.

As quickly as his passion had risen, Levignet's sense of the humorous reasserted itself, and he laughed so heartily that the people about him declared, "*C'est un farceur!*" and were rather disappointed when he locked arms with me and we resumed our promenade.

But we scrutinised approaching and passing carriages in vain. Weary of walking, we got into the victoria and rapidly retraversed the frequented, and explored the unfrequented avenues without catching a glimpse of the object of Levignet's hungering quest. The crowd was beginning to diminish, the carriages deserting the drives, for fashionable Paris is punctual in matters of form, and will not even linger in the Bois beyond the prescribed limit of time, let vulgarly unconventional sunsets cajole as they may.

"Avenue Bois de Boulogne," said Levignet to the coachman at last, and waxed taciturn as we entered the retiring procession.

When we arrived at the top of the Avenue, there was a crush of vehicles that brought our own to a stop. Levignet was not in the mood for waiting and, though he had agreed that we should dine together, he stepped down from the victoria with a flourish of apologetic leave-takings interlarded with expletives in disparagement of the police management of street traffic.

"You may abandon your carriage, Levignet, but

"I'll be hanged if you shall desert me," I protested, getting to the pavement with him. "Besides, I rather counted on your paying for my dinner."

"Come along, then," said Levignet, not at all displeased with my resolution to keep him in hand. "But I'm not in a frame of mind to make it worth your while. You may count on being bored."

We made our way among the block of carriages, at some hazard crossed to the Arc de Triomphe and were making a dash for the Champs Élysées pavement when who should come within an ace of running us down but 'Toinette and the Baron! It was only the quick action of the coachman in swerving the horses sharply to one side that saved Levignet from a hurt, owing to the fact that at the sight of the Baroness he had unconsciously arrested his steps. 'Toinette had uttered a cry of alarm and, the danger averted, ordered the carriage stopped at the curb, and called to Levignet:

"My dear friend, how incautious of you!" she chided, as Levignet came up. "You have given me a fright from which I shall not soon recover," and, Levignet offering some fatuous assurance of the pleasure it would have been to him to be trampled by that particular pair of bays, she added, "You are not to make light of a miraculous deliverance. Come! get in, with your companion, that we may scold you as you deserve, at our leisure."

With an eagerness almost comical, so naïve was Levignet's attempt to moderate his happiness, I was presented to the Baroness and the Baron, the latter courteously and feelingly repeating his wife's invitation to us, and in the next minute we were seated opposite the couple and spinning down the Avenue.

"Toinette persisted in treating the incident as if it had been a casualty, and Levignet as resolutely maintained the intelligent benevolence of Chance in guiding his course.

"You are a fatalist, monsieur?" de Noel asked smilingly.

"Not the least in the world, Baron. I do not say with the Italians, 'What will be, will be,' I only hold that what should be must be, and that the results we so commonly and erroneously attribute to coincidence are in reality the logical outcome of wise arrangement. The whole secret of right action, that completely disposes of the theory of coincidence, is obedience to so-called impulse, which is, in fact, a supreme command."

"I am afraid," objected the Baron good-humouredly, "that a good many of our impulses would urge us into conduct unpleasantly akin to folly."

"That is possible only when we debate them, or mistake personal inclination for super-conscious suggestion. The difficulty with most of us is that

we are cursed with the pride of intellect, and fancy that our few ounces of grey matter are equal to the analysis of Divinity. I am convinced that the fall of man was nothing more or less than his substitution of reason for instinct. For example, if you will permit me, I and my friend spent the afternoon in the endeavour to find you in the Bois——”

“But we did not go to the Bois to-day,” declared 'Toinette with judicial raillery. “My husband had business in Versailles this morning, and I begged to go with him. So you see your instinct——”

“Pardon,” said Levignet, interrupting her with a gesture. “You are but stating my case. It was reason, not instinct, that betrayed me to a waste of time in the Bois. It was instinct that urged me to cross the Place de l'Etoile at the critical moment to intercept your escape.”

“At the risk of your life, perhaps,” said 'Toinette, with an incredulous shake of the head. “A dangerous instinct, my good Levignet.”

“On the contrary, one of such admirable precision that it can calculate its limits of activity to a hair's breath.”

“At any rate,” de Noel said, with a smiling purpose to change the conversation, and bowing to include me in his invitation, “it procured us the pleasure of company which I hope we may com-

mand for the evening. You have made yourself a stranger, M. Levignet."

"It may be," Levignet replied gravely, his manner changing to uneasiness and embarrassment, "that you will wish me to be more of a stranger to you and Madame the Baroness when I take my leave of you. But if you will receive M. Summer-ville and me thus informally, you will give me an opportunity to make a statement it is important that you should hear."

De Noel and 'Toinette exchanged glances of inquiry before the Baron said, in friendly sincerity:

"No statement you may have to make, M. Levignet, can diminish the respect and esteem in which you are held by madame and myself."

"No, indeed!" 'Toinette warmly added, at the same time extending her hand to Levignet, who clasped it with undisguised emotion.

"It will be, then, because you know that my errors of judgment cannot be due to a lack of devotion."

'Toinette made a flattering answer, and with graceful tact immediately opened the way to light talk by putting a question to me in English. My response was near enough to a jest to afford an excuse for a little ripple of laughter and a witticism from the Baroness which the Baron followed up agreeably, and if the gaiety which ensued was of the forced variety, that never quite succeeds in

hiding constraint, the apparent result was a complete recovery from the temporary depression caused by Levignet's gloomy speech.

Though this was the first time I had met the Baroness—indeed, I had scarcely seen her since the memorable night in the Café Riche when Levignet told me her story—my intimate knowledge of her history made her seem to me an old, almost, I may say, privileged acquaintance. But had the circumstances been otherwise,—if, before getting into her carriage I had been in ignorance of her existence,—the candour and charm of manner, the vivacity of mind and the amiability of temper which added so greatly to the fascination of her remarkable beauty would have persuaded me to that tranquil freedom from reserve which gives character and value to human intercourse and discriminates the franchised intellect from the servile, suspicious and half-barbarous Bœotians who are herded under the stultifying brand of Polite Society.

It was difficult to reconcile her frank, even ingenuous good-nature and zest, her care-free, untroubled spirit of happiness with the fact that her life had been dragged through a tragedy of shame, and that over her impended the shadow of a past that might sweep down to her ruin. I had expected to see again some trace of triste memories in her smile, the lurking ghost of an old horror in her eyes, and detect behind her lightness the creep-

ing shade of a restless foreboding. But there was no sign whatever of the haunting sadness that had seemed an addition to her beauty when I saw her first. In the months since then, fear, distrust, anxiety, even recollection of unhappiness had, apparently, been dispelled; and it was easy to see that love was the necromancer.

XXX

POOOR Levignet! Before the evening was far advanced I had come to a keen sympathy with the sentiment of adoration with which his eyes shone when he looked on 'Toinette—a sentiment pathetic in its utter devotion, for the reason that the woman who inspired it was quite unaware of it, so all-excluding was her love for her husband. The gratitude of her heart had, indeed, built him a shrine of affection, but the offerings were to "*Mon bienfaiteur*," "*mon père*." Had it been suggested to her that Levignet's emotion was that hunger for possession which is man's love for woman, she might—so whimsical is the feminine sensorium—have laughed and tweaked his ear between her pretty thumb and finger to reprove his folly, accepting his passion as the natural tribute which man pays to sovereign woman—the mere rendering unto Cæsar the thing that is Cæsar's. But the same suggestion made to Levignet himself would have been a mortal affront, so greatly had the "one flower in the garden of his heart" expanded and deepened in hue and fragrance in the sunshine of the last few months. He had no dream of possession in his regard of this woman. The discrim-

ination that tempered his admiration of 'Toinette when he first talked with me about her had been swallowed up in idolatry. Like an Indian purada, he had gazed so long and fixedly into the face of his deity that he now believed it glorified by a swathing refulgence that refined its very deformities into the unit of perfection. In what concerned 'Toinette his judgment was no longer deliberate, selective. The cynical lightness that formerly characterised his talk and coloured his views of life had gradually softened into a sentimental quality of mind that he himself described as "optimistic melancholy." It was impossible to decide how much of the personal equation entered into his worship; but I thought, as I watched the play of his expression and caught the tone of his voice a number of times in the course of the evening, that if ever man in the vigour of his years felt a self-eliminating love for woman, Marcel Levignet was the man. That was the conviction in my mind that night, and the later events of the year make it sweet to remember now that I was able to appreciate the character of my friend. A less intimate, less sympathetic acquaintance might have been excusable in suspecting Levignet of a feeling strongly tinged with covetousness, for it is not to be denied that he evinced a fantastical, unconscious kind of jealousy of de Noel, who was ever alert to bestow pretty attentions and services upon his wife,

as eager with his gallantries as if he were a new-come suitor for her hand. But I, being the only one to note Levignet's conduct, saw in this jealousy only the pain of the zealot who suffers when irreverence touches even the outer garment of his personified saint.

"Must I banish myself to the salon?" Toinette demanded, when the coffee was brought in; "or will you let me stay and smoke a cigarette with you?"

"As you please," said de Noel, twinkling his preference.

"Stay; by all means, let us continue in a state of happiness," Levignet implored. "If you go, I shall be too surly for the security of these gentlemen. Come; do me the honour to light a cigarette from the end of mine."

"Willingly. But really I make rather a sorry spectacle as a smoker. I am still a novice."

"I have found it almost impossible to teach her," the Baron volunteered, chuckling reminiscently.

"I can't say I like it. But everyone is doing it."

"Yes; cigarette-smoking is in a fair way to become an exclusively feminine accomplishment," said de Noel. "We others will have to revive the snuffbox as a mark of distinction."

"You forget, Baron," I ventured, "that the ladies formerly excelled in the use of that article."

"True; and, the gentlemen retiring from the competition, the snuffbox and the elegance that went with it were banished from society. It is a process of social evolution that, after men have become thoroughly established in a vice, women will troop in to its adoption."

"That is as it should be," Levignet asserted, as he held his cigarette for 'Toinette to take a light. "Man is such an egotist that he never recognises his follies and vices until woman parades them in imitation."

"That sounds very much like a rebuke of my attempt to be sociable with you," 'Toinette laughed.

"Not at all," protested Levignet gallantly; "it was merely an acknowledgment of woman's corrective relation to the evils and blemishes of our eccentric system of civilisation, which only gets forward by reaction. It is my theory that men cease to be vicious only as women tend to become so. The best temperance lecture is an intoxicated woman. On the faith of an old soldier, it is my opinion that mankind will never appreciate the egregious folly of war and the grotesque madness of making heroes out of butchers of their fellow men until women take up the trade and try their hand at legislation by the cannon."

"That is a reflection of genius, M. Levignet," 'Toinette said in smiling approval, as she puffed

some smoke from her mouth. "If you will procure me a commission, I'll raise an army."

"I could nowhere find a general more certain of victory, madame,"

"No, no, M. Levignet," objected the Baron; "we must do nothing to put an end to war as long as the lower masses of humanity show such a frightful fecundity, and while the upper classes produce so many pretty gentlemen with no brain-power above the military level. The great peril of our time is superfluous population. Our academic statesmen are trying to solve the problem by pedagogy, though the only solution is to be found in the school of Mars. Europe and the world in general are suffering from plethora; the remedy is the old-fashioned one of bloodletting. Civilisation needs nothing so much as a decimating war every two years."

De Noel had spoken banteringly, but with the air of half-believing what he said.

Toinette clucked in amused protest, and required Levignet to bludgeon de Noel with his own fallacy.

"I do not absolutely disagree with him, madame; for, after all, humanity is much the same as rank meadowland, all the better for the sweep of the mower's scythe at convenient intervals."

"Are they not barbarians, M. Summerville?" Toinette queried, making a drolly awkward effort

to fling the ash from her cigarette with the tip of her little finger.

"Barbarians—or sages."

"Sages to talk like that! Bah!"

"I confess myself a barbarian, madame," said Levignet, "because I do not think that tailoring and architecture have done much to alter our primitive character. We have changed the habits but not the nature we had as troglodytes. We are not so splendidly ferocious as we were. We are not so superbly muscled. We have less self-reliant courage, less self-directing physical energy; but we are no whit less brutal, less selfishly eager to tear and rend and get the better of each other. We have substituted craft, cunning, duplicity, hypocrisy for the claws and teeth and stone hammer with which we used to settle our rivalries and terminate our disputes and accomplish our desires. But we are just as pitiless in our new way as we were in our old—just as determined to profit by the weakness and misfortunes of our fellows—just as treacherous in our friendships where self-interest arises. In short, dear madame, in spite of our laws and conventions, in spite of our cooks and our tailors and all the category in between, we are still as savage as our pithecoïd ancestors; and life is as predatory and fierce and heartless and profitless as it was when hairy man strove with shaggy brute for the possession of a lair."

"Bravo, Levignet!" exclaimed de Noel. "What you say is irrefutable science. I drink my Chartrouse in your honour."

"Ah, no, my dear friend, what you say is too gross for slander," Toinette said, looking at Levignet as she dropped into the ash-tray the cigarette she had only affected to smoke. "I do not like to see you cynical—I who find life beautiful—so beautiful, so sweet, that sometimes I tremble in the fragrance of it, fearful of the happiness I do so little deserve,—fearful lest I wake suddenly from the dream of it! It is easy to jest. We say things. We have our moods, it is true. But there is a light in your eyes, my friend, that gives the lie to the sneer on your lips. And I who know you so much better than do these others will not let you wrong yourself by false report. Come, then; you speak in this way because something troubles you. I have seen that you are not yourself. Well, we have dined. We have talked our nonsense. We may be serious. What was it you meant by the remark you made in the carriage? What has happened? What has made you uneasy? Tell us."

The Baron put his hand on Toinette's arm as if to caution her.

She glanced at me as she said to him, with an understanding smile, in which was a tinge of the sadness I fancied I saw in her eyes that night in the café:

"Have no fear. I guess that M. Summerville is in the confidence of our friend."

Levignet inclined his head.

"Only in a limited degree," I thought it judicious to explain, rising from my chair as I spoke; "and if M. le Baron, if Mme. le Baronne will permit me to take my leave——"

"Is it necessary?" "Toinette asked of Levignet. "Is it desirable?"

"M. Summerville is more trustworthy than I," replied Levignet, who had surrendered to melancholy and lapsed into the gloominess of our tête-à-tête at Suresnes.

"Then we shall take it as a favour if Monsieur will remain."

I thanked the Baroness for her graciousness, and reluctantly went to a seat in the window recess. I should have been glad to escape, and I was sure, too, that de Noel would have preferred to bow me out; but he seemed to regard acquiescence in 'Toinette's will so much as a matter of course that I could not profit by the slight shrug that qualified his affirmative gesture.

XXXI

THERE was silence during some moments, Levignet twisting his moustache abstractedly, de Noel and 'Toinette waiting expectantly.

When Levignet did speak, it was as if he were talking to himself, his chin on his breast, his eyes looking absently at the rug which he tapped with his foot.

“I have read somewhere—in Hugo, doubtless—of a gunner through whose carelessness a cannon got loose in the gun-room of a ship, endangering the lives of the crew and putting the vessel itself in peril. The great gun, feeling itself free, destructive, plunged here and there with the roll of the boat, battering, crushing, slaying; terrible,—a devil, a fury. The man grappled with the monster—Yes; it was Hugo. No one but the master could have described that struggle, and the triumph of the man, the mastery, the chaining of the gun in place. Well, you can say what happened. The gunner was taken on deck, decorated and shot. There is not a finer picture of exact justice in history. The heroism was fitly rewarded; the criminal blunder was suitably punished. Well, I have blundered as culpably as did the gunner; but I have

not, like him, retrieved my fault. You shall judge me; you shall condemn me."

Levignet presented an appearance of such dejection that 'Toinette, leaning forward, put her hand on his shoulder, to say:

"Take heart, my friend; you speak to those who love you."

"When you know what I have done, you will not say that. I have forfeited your trust, and with that goes your affection."

"Let us judge of that, my friend," de Noel said, with a deprecatory gesture.

"Ah! you shall."

Much in the fashion of a judge reviewing the conduct of a culprit he is about to condemn, Levignet recited the salient parts of the story he had told to me, giving no softening colour to his mischance, omitting everything favourable to himself, describing Madame Clifton's use of the whip as a merited chastisement, saying nothing of the money of which he had been so impudently defrauded.

The Baron made frequent exclamations of astonishment or indignation, as the various incidents were rehearsed; but 'Toinette listened in silence, though her eyes were eloquent enough, until he ended with a reference to the defection of old Suzel as the proper estimate of his forfeiture; then she went to him, bent down and kissed him on the cheek still marked by the stripe of the whip.

Levignet looked up.

"That is your answer to what I have said?"

"And well answered, too, my friend," declared the Baron, reaching out his hand to Levignet.

"Ah! you humiliate me," said Levignet as he took de Noel's hand. "I was better prepared for your reproach."

"Then you were disloyal to our friendship," 'Toinette objected.

"That is true, Levignet. We have the right to quarrel with you for that. But come. Let us consider the matter fairly. To begin with, you blame yourself extravagantly. Beyond the outrage you have suffered—and we must take account of that—no serious harm has been done. You have not, as you seem to think, made the situation more threatening than it was. Do you imagine the Clifton is readier than before to expose herself in an attempt to injure my wife? Pardon me for saying it, but the matter is clearer to my eyes than it has been to yours—for you have been blinded by a sentimental extravagance that has raised molehills to mountains in your fancy. You have allowed yourself to believe that 'Toinette has something to fear from the Clifton——"

"While that woman is alive, there is always the danger that she will attempt——"

"Bah!" said de Noel, interrupting Levignet. "I must persuade you to the contrary, as I long ago

persuaded 'Toinette herself, who had a terror of coming to Paris with me, but who has found in these two years that the way to dispel shadows is to keep in the light. Madame Clifton! good heaven! we are as safe from molestation by her as if she were buried under the Pyramids. You would have seen that as clearly as I do if you had not been so fearfully in love with my wife."

Levignet sat up with a jerk, his face flushing and paling as he looked, startled and confused, at de Noel.

"In love with your wife, Baron de Noel!"

De Noel laughed cheerily.

"Give yourself no uneasiness, my friend; and, above all, do not affront 'Toinette by denying it. Mon Dieu! Do you think, because you go blind-folded yourself, that no one else can see?" He laughed again, and tapped Levignet's knee with his finger. "If I were not as sure of 'Toinette's heart-beats as I am of my own, I might let jealousy in as a tenant of some dusty corner of my brain,—and what woman could be blamed for indulging a weakness for that Jovian head and the soul that keeps house in it? Come, come—let us have the smile that belongs on your lips and the twinkle that softens your eye—for, let me tell you, a large part of the affection I have for you is due to your appreciation of my wife."

Levignet, troubled, embarrassed, for once quite

at a loss for a word to say, was half inclined to be angry with de Noel. 'Toinette prettily turned to good account the frown that began knitting his eyebrows.

"Does it vex you to be suspected of caring for me?" she asked, and, before he could answer, added, "As for me, it gives me pleasure to think you do."

What could Levignet do but take the hand she held out to him, stammer a half intelligible banality over it, and hide it for a moment beneath the sweep of his moustache?

"I repeat," said de Noel, "that there is no reason why we should be apprehensive or you should blame yourself, Levignet. The damage done is that you have been struck——"

"And robbed," I could not help interposing, as I came from the window to remind them of my presence, which they seemed in a way to forget.

"Robbed!" exclaimed de Noel and 'Toinette together.

"Chut! Summerville," said Levignet warningly; but without in the least heeding him, I told them of the knavery by which he had been eased of the one hundred thousand francs.

There were no bounds to their astonishment and indignation, but they were not the least disposed to take Levignet's quixotic view of the necessity for inaction.

"It is too monstrous! You have suffered the greatest indignity on my account, and been robbed of a fortune, and you think we will permit you to keep silence! Do you imagine my husband and I will find my protection in the sacrifice of a friend?"

"Devil take it, Levignet," said de Noel, "you shall set your friend the Prefect onto this indescribable coquin, or I must take it upon myself to make an occasion to run a rapier through whatever is vital in him."

"In order that next day every rag of a newspaper can make free with the name of Madame the Baroness! That every boulevard gossip-mongery may add its invention to the tale of slander! And you will have accomplished what?"

"You would pay too dearly for the privilege of kicking a rat into the sewer," I ventured to suggest, looking at the Baron.

"That is precisely the true word," Levignet asserted.

"But to let the scoundrel triumph!—to let him laugh at us!" de Noel exclaimed passionately, thumping the table and rising to his feet. "It is intolerable. We shall contrive a revenge. As for the amount you have lost——"

"That is not to be considered," Levignet objected. "It is scarcely more than the twentieth part of a fortune that I have always found superfluous, and which I would cheerfully devote to the

service of"—Levignet hesitated an instant—"any friend who would do me the honour to make use of it," he added, with a gesture intended to give quite an impersonal character to his benevolence.

'Toinette made a sign of grateful negation, while de Noel replied:

"Be that as it may, a way must be found to recover your money, or I shall make good your loss."

Levignet, looking sidewise at de Noel, and pulling an end of his moustache beneath his chin, said smilingly:

"Do you know, Baron, that I stopped a Prussian bullet with my knee while performing an act of thoughtless folly, for which someone thought fit to give me a decoration of some sort?"

"I know you have several deeds of heroism to your credit," answered de Noel, rather nonplussed, "but I don't see——"

"The decoration?" Levignet interrupted. "No. I never wear it. The trifling difficulty I have with my knee reminds me better than could medal or ribbon that I once did some good in an emergency." He gave a droll glance at the bit of ribbon in de Noel's buttonhole. "All sorts of people wear decorations for all sort of reasons; but everyone cannot boast of having half an ounce of Prussian lead neatly tucked away in the bone."

The others laughed at his pretended vanity in giving his knee an approving pat, and there was a

tacit acquiescence on their part in his obvious desire to avoid serious discussion.

"I'm afraid the Legion of Honour would have to go out of business if the price of its ribbons were half-ounces in the bone," Toinette said as she blinked roguishly at the Baron.

"Ah! I see," de Noel chuckled, following her lead, "you both undertake to disparage the merit of my little knot of red because it was won in the diplomatic service. But let me tell you that, when diplomacy becomes an honest science instead of a political craft, the state will have no use for soldiers—unless we keep a company here and there for the amusement of the rabble, much as we keep companies of actors. But what the deuce, Levignet, has your Prussian souvenir to do with what we were saying?"

"Only this; when I am about to curse the twinge in my knee, I soothe myself with the recollection that I came by it in a way not entirely to my discredit. On the other hand, if I ever come to have a pang on account of my stolen francs, I shall have an instant anodyne in the reflection that their loss was an exceedingly mild punishment of a most egregious blunder on my part. You understand that both my wounds, the one in my leg and the one in my vanity, are of such inestimable value as correctives of my character that I would, for no consideration, be deprived of either."

"That may be philosophic; it is not, however, practical," de Noel declared. "But I won't argue with you. You are too obstinate to be convinced by anything but your own opinion. Haven't we found that to be the fact, *cherie*?"

"Undoubtedly," 'Toinette laughed. "We must do with him as we do with children—find a way to make him swallow his medicine without knowing it. You should take it in a lump of sugar, *mon ami*."

"I know precisely the answer to that speech," Levignet said, nodding his head sagely at 'Toinette, and smiling.

"Make it!" de Noel tapped him on the arm. "You need not consider me."

"It is made," Levignet retorted. "A beautiful woman is always clairaudent. You have but to look into her eyes and she hears the tribute of your emotions."

"That is a poetical fancy too delicate for my prosaic wits," 'Toinette objected. "Besides, I like tangible sweets. I have not enough imagination for a Barmecide pastime." There was a provoking prettiness in her smile.

"A challenge, Levignet," de Noel exclaimed. "You cannot escape it. Now, then, for an impromptu in the form of a quotation from the book of gallantry."

While de Noel was speaking, a footman came in

with a letter, and Levignet, waving his hand in the direction of the fellow, said, *à la Coquelin*.

"Behold, it is borne to you on a salver."

"For Madame the Baroness," said the lackey.

"For me?"

"By hand, madame."

Toinette, who had been holding a light to my cigarette, took up the letter, looked curiously at the address, which puzzled her, turned the envelope to see if there was a seal at the back, and declared ruefully:

"I haven't an idea who it is from."

"An excellent reason for returning it unopened," de Noel said, offering to take the letter from her hand.

"You are making fun of me," Toinette laughed, as she tore the envelope across, "not knowing that most letters are interesting only while they are sealed." She nodded to dismiss the footman, and unfolded the letter.

"You have never had an opportunity of corresponding with me," retorted de Noel.

Toinette glanced at Levignet, and then at me.

"You permit me to read it?"

Anticipating our assent, she held the letter toward one of the candles and began reading. But at the first words, she uttered a subdued cry, and her expression of gaiety turned to one of blank consternation.

"It is from Madame Clifton!"

"The devil!" exclaimed de Noel, taking the letter she impulsively thrust toward him.

Levignet abruptly uncrossed his legs and grasped the arms of his chair as if about to rise.

"What does she say?" he asked, leaning toward de Noel.

"Humph!" said the Baron, and then began reading aloud.

"Madame Clifton presents her compliments to the Baroness de Noel, and begs leave to express her astonishment at the stupidity that has so long prevented her identifying the popular and charming Baroness with her old friend, M^{lle} Beaudais. Madame Clifton is grieved to think that the delayed recognition has been due to the fact that the Baroness de Noel has been at pains to avoid personally meeting her once trusted friend, and would be glad to learn from the Baroness if an opportunity may be granted for an explanation that may restore friendly relations. Madame Clifton had understood that the Baron de Noel had married an English lady, which may in a measure account for the fact that she did not see in the new Baroness the less splendid and less beautiful Antoinette Beaudais, whom she had known in sadder circumstances. Madame Clifton would be pleased to call on the Baroness de Noel, if that lady will graciously appoint a time. To avoid the uncertainty of the post,

the bearer of this note will wait to receive the answer.' "

Levignet had risen to his feet, and stood clutching the back of the chair, his face pale with anger. 'Toinette was motionless and haggard.

Neither of them spoke when de Noel stopped, and in silence he went to the bell-rope, which he gave a violent pull.

The footman re-entered the room as if he had been in readiness for the summons.

"Is there a messenger waiting?"

"Yes, M. le Baron."

"Tell him there is no answer."

The footman retired, and de Noel returned to his chair.

"She threatens us," 'Toinette said piteously, looking at de Noel as if the danger were his rather than her own.

"It means war—but—" de Noel crushed the letter in his hand—"have no fear, *mon amie*; we shall triumph."

"You will be ruined," she moaned. "I foresaw it. The crime of which I have to repent is that I let you sacrifice yourself by marrying me."

De Noel went to her side, took her two hands in his, raised her to her feet, and kissed her forehead.

"That I have the right to defend you makes me the happiest man in the world. You gave me your

hand, but I have always had a romantic wish to win it."

"Ah! it is the lightning from the clear sky. You are its victim, not I."

She snatched away her hands from de Noel and, greatly agitated, hurried toward the door, intending, no doubt, to hide in the privacy of her own room the emotion she felt unable to restrain.

Levignet, who had stood in statuesque silence, called out to her, and went to prevent her opening the door. It was evident to me that he feared to let her go by herself.

"Wait," said he. "It is for me to act. My idiocy has brought matters to this crisis; it is my office to shield you from the consequences of my folly. I beg you to rest assured that I shall relieve you of all anxiety. I have a plan that has come to me as an inspiration. It cannot fail to extricate you from the present danger and free your mind from any fear of Madame Clifton. Will you trust me?"

"I have always trusted you, my friend."

"You shall find that your trust is not misplaced," Levignet declared, an unwonted tremor in his voice. He held her hand for a moment, and then led her back to the table, where de Noel stood moodily uncertain.

"Baron," asked Levignet, "will you be guided by my advice?"

"At least, I shall be glad to hear it."

"It is that the Baroness write at once to Madame Clifton, inviting her to come here in the afternoon of Friday—three days from now."

"My wife invite that woman!" exclaimed de Noel. "It is not to be thought of."

"It will give me time to put my plan into operation, and—Madame Clifton will not come."

"What is your plan?"

"That you shall learn in its success."

"M. Levignet is wise, *mon ami*," said 'Toinette, pleadingly. "I have faith in his word."

"Very well," said de Noel, after a pause; "you shall write."

"Send it at once by messenger," Levignet urged. He took out his watch. "It is ten o'clock. M. Summerville and I have an engagement for half-past. You will excuse us?"

"And when shall we see you again?"

"To-morrow, perhaps, or the day after." Then, turning to 'Toinette, "You will abate none of your social gaieties. You will not let it appear that anything has occurred to disturb your serenity. You have numerous engagements?"

"No. You know everyone is occupied this week with the Charity Bazaar."

"At any rate, wherever you go, let no one see a cloud on your gaiety."

"You are mysterious," said de Noel.

"No; only precautionary. Good-night. And believe in me."

Either his good humour had returned, or he acted excellently, for he laughed cheerily as he shook hands with them, declaring:

"I have a capital plan to put this enemy to rout. It will become a jest with us in our future cosy chats over your faultless wine, Baron. You shall see if Levignet has the wit to correct his errors. You shall not be at the trouble to air your salon after a visit from Madame Clifton. Come, my dilatory Summerville; we shall miss our engagement."

We went arm-in-arm down the stairs, and Levignet tossed a ten-franc piece to the astonished lackey who served us as we passed through the great doorway.

"Where shall we go?" he demanded as we reached the pavement.

"You made the engagement," I replied laughingly.

"Then, let us walk as our legs take us."

XXXII

HE was not communicative as we wandered aimlessly, and only replied to my casual remarks in a self-absorbed fashion. Finally, when we were in the dim seclusion of the Cours la Reine, I ventured the question that had been piquing my curiosity:

“Have you really a plan to muzzle the Clifton?”

“Effectually.”

“It is your secret?”

“I have no secrets from you, friend Summer-ville. You are my *fidus Achates*. But I hesitate to put you in peril by making you my confidant in this.”

“I should be in good company if I share the peril with you.”

“No. I should make you my accomplice. I don't need an accomplice in this. If I did, I should not involve you, my boy; I should hunt out some such fellow as my old friend Benoist, if he is still at large. A trusty fellow is the admirable Benoist.”

“Good God! Levignet, you don't mean that you contemplate——”

"I do," he interrupted carelessly, anticipating what I hesitated to say.

I stopped still, dumfoundedly looking at him as he turned inquiringly.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"You wouldn't do such a thing, Levignet!" I stammered.

"My dear Summerville, I served three years as a hired assassin in state livery, and I remember once to have sabred a lad whose mother's milk was scarce dry in his mouth, and for no better reason than that he wore a foreign uniform. In the name of a hundred thunders, shall a man who has done that scruple to crunch a scorpion under his heel!" He turned fiercely, clutched me by the lapel of my coat and, glaring into my eyes, said in a tense whisper, "I tell you, Summerville, I shall kill that woman!"

"No, no! Levignet."

"Yes, yes! Summerville. It is the only way."

"You are mad, Levignet!"

"Yes, mad, thank God!"

He took off his hat, thrust the thick locks of white hair from his forehead, readjusted his hat, and walked on some distance in silence. I followed him mechanically, my mind dumb and inert, a vague fear at my heart as if he were on his way toward the deed, and I powerless to hinder him.

Suddenly he wheeled around, took me by the

arm and, in his usual easy humour, said with a chuckle of expectancy:

“I'll tell you what we'll do,—we'll spend an hour at the ‘Ambassadeurs.’ There is a droll fellow who makes me laugh. I predict he will be a card some day. Come.”

XXXIII

WE entered the enclosure of the open air resort that depends so largely for its existence upon the patronage of inquisitive foreigners; but, instead of looking for seats among the chairs under the trees, Levignet led the way to the pavilion at the end of the garden, and we mounted to a table in the loggia. There was so much zest and lightness in his manner, he spoke so banteringly and made such droll comments on the "divette" who was just then entertaining the audience, that I began to recover from the alarm caused by his desperate speech in the Cours la Reine.

"What will you have, Summerville? Sherry? For myself, I shall need a sedative of brandy. When my brain is capricious in its fancies and plays at *cache-cache* with my judgment, a bumper of brandy restores it to reasonable order. Folly animates—brandy adjusts. A large glass of brandy, *garçon*, some of your best cigars and a chopine of sherry for Monsieur. We shall be comfortable. Possibly you are hungry. No? Nor I. My objection to dining with de Noel is that he has picked up a damnably seductive cook who tempts me to

overfeed. Ah!" with a quick deprecatory gesture, "those are your countrymen and the English. We French merely suffer these things."

His last half contemptuous remark referred to the noisy applause with which the "divette" was being recalled.

"I am afraid, Levignet, you French are rather given to foisting your infirmities upon the shoulders of your foreign guests. Your press has some very fondling terms for these lively ladies."

"Bah! Those are but echoes of the *promenoir*. The press does not herald these *friponnes* until the *claque* and the imbeciles have given them a vogue. You see, friend Summerville, Paris is the unmasking ground of hypocritic Christendom. There is a tradition among you vagrants from the four corners of the earth that nothing counts in Paris; and the moment you get your lungs filled with the atmosphere of our boulevards, you kick free from habitual restraints of thought and conduct, and surrender to the promptings of your native devil. That is why you fly where catins like M'lle Thingumbob there display themselves, passing the limits of decency, caterwauling in their fish-vendor voices salacities that tickle the vicious, and making gestures that inform the innocent. You applaud what makes you blush, and excuse yourselves by pretending to think it clever. Clever! It is the cleverness of the kitchen-wench who makes a spiced

stew out of the scrapings of dinner-plates left by a company of sloppy gluttons. It is nauseous to sanity."

He made a grimace at the fancied dish, and drank off at once half the glass of brandy the waiter set before him.

"I agree with you. And, speaking of sanity, I must confess that I was fool enough to be frightened by what you said a while ago."

"What was that?"

"I mean your extravagant threat concerning Madame Clifton."

"Humph! Was it extravagant?"

"I have too noble an opinion of you to imagine otherwise."

"That you think nobly of another man argues nobility in yourself, Summerville. You have a generous sentiment, and I am pleased to have the benefit of it. But you are not an abstract reasoner. You lack the inductive faculty. You cannot construct a syllogism backwards. By the way, do you know the story of old Banéban and the Queen of Hungary?"

"I don't recall it."

"I may as well tell you that as talk banalities. It is an interesting bit of history, and it may help you to another word than 'extravagant' with which to characterise my purpose."

"Your 'purpose,' Levignet?"

"You shall judge. Listen to my story and catch the merit of it. It was in the reign of André the Second, far enough away to exempt us from a charge of *lese-majeste* in repeating the scandal. This Banéban was palatine of the kingdom, and his long-proved zeal and fidelity had established him in the confidence of the king, so that when it became necessary for André to go to Constantinople to negotiate a peace with the neighbouring princes, he felt perfectly secure in leaving Banéban as regent. 'I leave you', said André, 'no other instructions than this: Deal in exact justice with all of my subjects without regard to questions of birth or dignity,' which, I need not tell you, sums up the whole office of reputable sovereignty. Now the wife of Banéban—devil take me if I can remember her name, but Constance is a suitable one, and I'll use it—was young, charming and of a beauty that influences loose men to dream of damnation. It happened in her case that there was as much chastity as fascination, and she enjoyed the respect of the Court, which, as courts go, is saying a good deal. But, soon after the departure of the king, the queen's younger brother, the Count of Moravia, came to visit his royal sister, and—I must stick to the facts of history—promptly committed the indiscretion of falling fathoms deep in love with the palatiness. When the acquaintance had matured into intimacy through a week of fêtes, pleasures

and gaieties, the count, with the impudent courage of a practised gallant, seized an occasion to declare his passion to Constance. But that lady—I recall the exact words of the old historiographer—but that lady, even more virtuous than she was beautiful, only responded to his overture by the severity of her looks. You may think that a sufficiently mild rebuke, but if there is any check to lawless passion more potent than the look of a loyal woman, it is a matter of swords and gunpowder. Of course, the first resistance had the usual effect of stimulating the count's criminal desires; but when he found that successive efforts to betray the lady only resulted in widening the distance that separated them, the count declined into such a melancholy that the queen, alarmed for his health, brought him to a confession of his ailment. It is not my purpose to moralise for your benefit, friend Summerville, and you may make your own mental comments on the nature of the queen's complaisance in undertaking to arrange the matter for the gratification of her brother's passion. I only tell you the facts. *Eh, bien!* The queen counselled the count to dissimulate his sentiments under a respectful address, until such time as the confidence of Constance could be re-established, and that lady induced to return to the court intimacy from which she had withdrawn to escape the count's persecution. I refer you to the pages of M. Fillassier's capital historic compi-

lation for the proof of the statement that the queen, having secured Constance in a remote apartment of the palace, opened the door to the count, who played the rôle of Tarquin in the favourable circumstances. In a speech, the dignity and painful beauty of which I will not mar by an imperfect quotation, Constance informed Banéban of his and her dishonour, lamenting the fact that religion forbade her to end a life that had been made odious to her. The regent was a man clean through, my friend, and you may picture for yourself the disorder of his emotions. But he clasped his wife consolingly in his arms, declaring to her that an involuntary fault was rather a misfortune than a crime, and that the violence done to her person had not altered the purity of her soul. 'But,' said he, 'there shall be a vengeance equal to the enormity of the outrage.' This Banéban was not a fellow to make idle threats. *Ma foi!* I should think not. Men of character are as careful of their threats as they are mindful of other obligations. In two days Banéban was in private audience with the queen. 'Madame,' he addressed her with the superb calm of a great soul, 'you have robbed my wife of her most precious jewel; I must search for it in your heart.' And, with the word, he struck his dagger into her breast. Leaving her dead in the cabinet, he announced to the courtiers what he had done, and his reason for

it, and no one offering to prevent him, he mounted his horse and, accompanied by two or three lords of his suite, set out for Constantinople to put himself into the hands of his king. Kneeling before the king, and tendering his sword, he said, 'Sire, in giving me your orders before quitting Hungary, you urged me above all things to render exact justice to your subjects without regard to rank or condition. I have done so. I have killed the queen, your wife, for having prostituted mine. I bring you my head, which I did not choose to save by an ignoble flight. Do what you will with me, and let your people judge by my life or death whether you hold me innocent or guilty.' It is an incredible fact that his Majesty André the Second had something in him to justify the superstition that kings are so by divine grace. He did not furiously chop off the head of our friend Banéban. *Mirabile dictu*, he gave back the regent's sword and bade him rise. 'Return to Hungary, my lord, and continue to administer justice to my subjects with as much exactitude and severity as you have rendered it in your own behalf. When I return, I will determine from an investigation whether your action deserves praise or punishment.' It was excellent art in old Fillassier that he left it to our intelligence to finish his exemplary story of the Regent Banéban. I do not care what moral you draw from it. I do not ask whether you regard that dagger thrust

as murder or the supreme act of retributive justice; whether you execrate Banéban or applaud him; whether you drink to his health in paradise or murmur a prayer for his soul in hell; whether you think him madman or the inexorable minister of Fate. It is the story; you have it; interpret it as you please."

"Little matter how, Levignet. The story was diverting—not to the purpose. You are not in the case of Banéban. No André the Second has appointed you regent to measure justice to his subjects."

"You are wrong there, my friend. Virtue is king over all, and every man is regent of the kingdom. The faithful regent takes counsel of his conscience, and accepts its dictation as the sovereign will. When conscience approves, the law of convention is put aside that Equity, the eternal goddess of true souls, may have free course. But let us not fall into a debate of principles. I am stubborn in the support of my convictions. With me a fixed idea is a divine decree, and not debatable. Understand; resolve; perform. That is my ritual, shorn of superlatives. It is not in the tongue of man to change me. I believe that is a quotation from your Shakespeare. I like its vigour. Ah! here we are. This is my amusing fellow. Listen to him. Observe him. Tell me if I am not right in saying he will one day be a card. I heard him

first in that hole of a Bobino in the Montparnasse quarter. I said a word for him. He is getting on. Is there a better face for comedy in France? Five inches more, with a suspicion of added finesse, and you might look for him in the Comedie Française a year or so from now. The grand virtue of us French is that we set up ladders everywhere by which merit may mount to its deserts. That is where the Latins are superior to your Anglo-Saxons. Is he not inimitable? ”

Levignet laughed at the fellow's drollery, his eyes sparkling, his head nodding, and his hands pattering approbation. For some minutes neither of us spoke. I could not believe him earnest in his professed design, and yet I feared. At length I leaned nearer to him across the narrow table, and touched his arm.

“You torture me, Levignet. Give me the assurance that your plan of action does not really have any relation to the rôle of a Banéban.’

“Take an easy mind to bed with you, Summer-ville, and revolve the Italian proverb—*Che sara sara*. Wise men never vex themselves with the casualties of to-morrow.”

“Make my mind easy then, old friend. Give me the assurance I ask. Why the deuce should you contemplate extreme measures, when there are a thousand alternatives? You are inventive, sagacious, resourceful, you have no lack of money—

surely you can serve your purpose without having recourse to——”

“Chut! Summerville. I interrupt you to save you from puerilities. You attach importance to terms and shudder at words. That was very well when your nurse wished to stop your fretful whimperings and threatened you with bogies. We give new values to myths when we have learned how to analyse them, and we blow out the candle without being afraid of the dark.”

“All the same, Levignet, when one has blown out the candle, one is at the mercy of the darkness.”

“I understand your parable. But darkness is a security, my friend. I shall sleep sound in the embrace of happy dreams when a particular candle is blown out. I shall not regret it. Why should you?” He lighted a fresh cigar. “Let us not continue to speak figuratively. It taxes my invention to play with similes and metaphors. Each of us is born into the world to discharge an economic duty in the general evolution of the race. We tickle our vanities with the notion that the divine order requires something exceptional at our hands, some splendid achievement, some dazzling performance; and we quite condemn the fact that the wriggling white worm, eating its industrious way into the heart of a carrion, is serving the race as certainly as a Napoleon who sets his army to shovel-

ling away the corruption of demoralised dynasties. There is no high or low office in the evolutionary plan of nature. All its agents are on a plane of equality.

"We may give ourselves airs and strut to our heart's content; but—butterfly or scavenger-beetle, lion or jackal, philanthropist or misanthrope, saint or sinner, judge or culprit, devouring or devoured—we are all mere atoms in the outworking of an inscrutable cosmos. Our equality is proved by the fact that, when we have served the purpose for which we are set in motion, it is our common lot to rot in the earth. The knife of Brutus weighed as heavily in the world's balance as the sceptre of Cæsar. It was a flea bite that saved an empire by waking a prince as an assassin crept in at his door. Virginius, hedged from the villainous Appius by the scurvy lictors, unable to reach the tyrant, sanctified his daughter's chastity in the blood of her own sweet breast. Well, my friend, if you have not found a new word for my 'extravagance,' seek for it in my tenet that any means to a good end is a just means. I stand between Virginia and Appia. Shall I strike the innocent when I can reach the guilty?"

"You shall strike neither, if I can bring you to reason."

"So?" He laughed lightly. "Reason is a tedious mistress. I discarded her long ago."

"Tell me what you intend doing—what plan you propose to follow."

"That shall be as Chance and Impulse decide. I follow impulse. I came in here to-night in obedience to impulse. I thought it would lead to something. I have looked about. There is nothing to interest me. Evidently I let a secondary impulse deceive me. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes."

"I'll walk toward your hotel with you."

"My intention is to go home with you."

"Oh, you mean to keep an eye on me! Very well. So be it. I have pyjamas at your service; but I have no Suzel to make you comfortable. We shall miss her coffee and her hot buttered rolls. Ah! me. I miss them. Come along, then."

We talked far into the morning, seated in his cosy work den, I serious, pleading, remonstrant in turn; he jestingly evasive and fantastic, abating nothing of his terrible purpose, which he treated as lightly as if the taking of a "superfluous life" were, indeed, no more than the blowing out of a candle. Disheartened and racked by my doubts and anxieties, unable to think of a way to keep him from the crime or prevent its success, vaguely catching at the possibility of warning Madame Clifton without betraying Levignet or provoking her vindictiveness, I rose at last to say good-night.

"Good-night and sweet dreams," he said cheerily, keeping his seat. "But, one word before you go. I look into your mind, my friend. I know; I know there is a conflict, and I know it is due to your concern for me. Your fears are on my account, and you would like well to run off to my friend the Prefect and make a clean breast to him, to the end that old Marcel Levignet may not run the risk of getting his neck on the chopping-block. Well, look here." He took from his pocket the metal case in which he kept the ring he had taken from 'Toinette, and opened it and held the jewel toward the light. "Madame Clifton and I are both people very much in earnest, and rather reckless in carrying out our schemes. That clever woman has considered. She has gone over her ground. Her letter to the baroness was the result of a deliberate calculation of all chances. She feels so confident of herself that she is resolved to use 'Toinette and de Noel, or ruin them. If you interfere in her behalf, if you defeat my object, it will be the same as if you emptied the contents of this ring into the drink I am about to take. I swear to you, my friend, if I suffer the chagrin of seeing the Baroness de Noel the prey of that woman, I will swallow the powder in this cache. Good-night."

He smiled and nodded as he raised the glass.

"To your sweet repose."

XXXIV

THE grey ghost of morning was filtering through the narrow opening of the carelessly drawn curtains of my window before I closed my eyes in a troubled sleep. I was awakened by Levignet, who tapped me on the shoulder and called me by name.

"Do you imagine," he asked, as I drowsily turned to look up at him, "that you are one of the seven sleepers? Ten hours of oblivion at a stretch is an impeachment of your moral fibre."

"What time is it?"

"Nearly noon."

"Then I have not done so badly. It was daylight before I went to sleep. Have you been up long?"

"I haven't been to bed. I took a cat nap in my easy chair; I had need of my time. You know your way to the bathroom?"

"Yes."

"I have an excellent melon in ice for you; don't let it get too cold. I'm rather on edge for a slice of it."

"Don't wait for me."

"A virtuous melon should be partaken in company. A really good one is like an honest man,

the pick of ten thousand. I have laid this one in halves and can answer for it. Shall I grill you a chop? Or would you like a bit of fish? Or both?"

"A small chop is about my measure."

"I am not peremptory, but I only allow you twenty minutes for your toilet. Will you have an 'appetiser'?"

"No, thank you. I am normal."

"If you change your mind, you will find a decanter in the cupboard. In case of need, ring for Joseph. Suzel's *locum tenans*, you understand. Twenty minutes, mind you."

He shook a warning finger at me as he left the room, and I heard him go down the stairs whistling "Home to our Mountains," from the time-worn opera so great a favourite with him. The air had always seemed to me a joyous one—but not as he whistled it in deep-toned andante. There was a flute-like quality of pathos in it that reminded me of a night when my gondolier, letting his gondola rock loiteringly under the Bridge of Sighs, drew from his pocket an ocherina, and played upon it so dolorously that I heard the shuffle of centuries of footsteps on the worn stones overhead, as the victims of the inexorable Ten went slow-pacing to their doom. A door closed on Levignet, but the whistling, even more melancholy for its indistinctness, sifted through the walls and

began shaping itself, in my fancy, into words, whispering to me the sombre thoughts of the whistler. I could entertain no comforting doubt that Levignet had perfected his plan. He was prepared for the desperate office. He was self-consecrated to the performance of a repugnant duty, a duty from which he instinctively shrank, but which he was resolved to execute, not in the least concerned with the consequence to himself. And I was made intuitively aware, too, of the fact that he had settled in his mind the means by which to put his purpose into effect. The feeling that one is powerless either to persuade or to prevent a friend from a course that leads straight on to his ruin may admit of analysis;—but as I hurried through my toilet that morning I was conscious of nothing more definite than a nervous dread that I should fail to get down to the breakfast room within the time jestingly fixed by Levignet. It seemed to me that the most momentous thing in the world just then was the fate of the cooling melon, the delicate flavour of which too great a chill would spoil.

When I entered the breakfast-room, Levignet sat at a small bureau under the window, writing. He tossed aside his pen and rose with a compliment on my punctuality. If he observed in my face the trouble of my emotions he ignored it, ceremoniously placing a chair at the table for me, as he

chatted, emptying the cracked ice from his share of the melon, seating himself with a sigh of anticipatory enjoyment; and began scooping up with his spoon luscious bits of the exquisite fruit.

"You cannot get from your piece the savour of mine. I have the advantage of you. I have earned the right to enjoy by my industry. I have been busy while you were lolling indolent in a bed of ease. For one thing, a letter came from the Baroness—Baroness! It was signed 'Toinette.' A letter from 'Toinette. Quite in the proper spirit; inviting me to spend a franc or two at her booth in the bazaar this afternoon. She pretends to a fear that she may lack patrons. Ha! if her receipts do not double those of any other lady's, I do not know my Parisians. How do you find the melon?"

"Faultless."

"I have a fruiterer who finds it worth while to flatter my tastes. Not that I pay so much more than another; but I have been in trade myself, and know the value of a pinch of courtesy and a recognition of the rights of man. I give old Lozet to understand that I esteem his judgment and respect his virtues as a caterer, with the agreeable result that France has no better fruit than finds its way to my table. As with fruit, so with other things, my friend. If you would be served to the best, get at the best in those who

serve you. Name of the devil! The reason so large a part of the world feels the sting of thorns is that the majority of us insist on feeding our vanity at the expense of the other fellow's pride. No man is without his share of *amour propre*. Respect it, and you will find that there are different values in the work of even a scavenger. Have a look at my dust-bin. It is as wholesome as one of old Suzel's casseroles. Ah! old Suzel. I bred too great a self-respect in her. I fell below her level of reciprocity. But I don't like your silence. It is an admitted fact that a conversation requires at least a yea and nay antiphone, whereas you are as dumb as an oyster. Can you not favour me with an occasional exclamation? A thousand thunders! do you hint that I am garrulous?"

"I am thinking, Levignet, that you might discover a way to apply your golden rule to Madame Clifton."

"Humph! That has come into my mind, also."

"Well?"

"And been discarded. Still, I shall make the effort. Since you have introduced the subject, let us discuss it. Make an end of your melon, and we'll have in the chops. Then I'll send Joseph out. He is new to me, and may have the keyhole habit. When he has been with me a year or so, I'll know his moral calibre."

He rang the bell, gave his orders and, the changes made, dismissed Joseph with a commission to the tobacconist. Left to ourselves, Levignet began talking again, but with more seriousness.

"I told you I did not wish to involve you in my affairs by acquainting you with my intentions. But I conclude that your conscience will be no more disturbed by details than it already is by conjectures. If I had said nothing to you, in the event of a certain casualty you would have declared to yourself, 'Levignet is the man.' Very well; it would be as hard for you merely to suspect as it will be if you know. You may, however, rest easy on one point—you will have nothing to conceal. I shall not be a skulking assassin. Marcel Levignet has never yet had anything to hide from man or God. We do not teach old dogs new tricks. To the point. At nine o'clock this morning I sent a note by hand to Madame Clifton, telling her that I had a fancy to buy her carriage and pair, which I was prepared to do without regard to price. I begged her to name a time in the twenty-four hours that I might confer with her in the matter. She replied by my messenger. Here is the answer, written on the back of one of her visiting cards:

" 'Madame Clifton is not sure that she cares to sell, but will hear M. Levignet's offer at ten o'clock to-night, if he will call.' "

"I returned word that I should be at her door precisely on the hour."

"I see. You hope to buy her off."

"Not merely that. It would be easy enough to buy her off, as you put it. I must have a guaranty that she will stay bought. One does not put trust in cattle of her sort. I must be sure of her silence when the bargain is concluded.

"I have written out a brief statement of the circumstances attending the seduction of M'lle Beaudais, inculpating Madame Clifton, and the facts leading up to and including the death of Judge Chartier of which Madame Clifton has cognisance. If she will sign that paper, she can name her own price for her signature, attested by Joseph."

"Joseph?"

"Oh! I neglected to tell you that Joseph is a notary."

"If she will not sign?"

"It is all one. She will have had the chance. In any case, I will feel sure of her silence when I leave her."

"You don't imagine, do you, Levignet, that she will receive you alone?"

"Probably not. It doesn't matter."

"But Clifton isn't the only one you have to silence. There is the Marquis."

"Oh, no! My word for it, the Marquis knows

nothing of the story. Clifton is much too shrewd to have let him into the secret. Besides, I have sounded him."

"When?"

"This morning. I had twenty minutes talk with him. He would almost be willing to give me back the hundred thousand to know why I do not prosecute him. I was sure it was Clifton's doings. She simply used the monkey. He knows nothing."

"May I offer you my advice?"

"Why not? I am not obliged to take it."

"I am of de Noel's opinion. You have a distorted view of the Clifton. She will blackmail you if she can frighten you with threats; but if you will defy her, challenge her to do her worst——"

"You are a novice, my friend," Levignet interrupted. "Your faith in 'Toinette's romance closes your eyes to the important fact that she has not a single witness to corroborate any part of her statement. And if you will examine the case as dispassionately as judge or jury would, you will be forced to confess that there is a good deal of the incredible in a story that is not consistent with the general opinion as to how clandestine love-affairs work out in Paris. On the other hand, see how things are arrayed against her. To the public eye, Madame Clifton is a woman of exemplary character. She abounds in good works. She prays without ceasing—at least, she is a church

habituée. She figures in every charitable movement—you will find her installed at the Bazaar. She is fortified in grace. Now suppose she should have a sudden scruple of conscience, and feel impelled to unburden her mind of a troublesome secret. She could represent herself as a benevolent body who, through an excess of compassion, had been tempted to shield a young girl from the consequences of an odious crime. Any fiction she might falter into the ears of Justice would be, *prima facie*, acceptable to our wiggled donkeys. Who could disprove her snivelling hypocrisies? She is clever enough to invent a circumstantial case that would come near enough to the truth to be incontrovertible by anything 'Toinette could say in her own defence. You and de Noel attribute too much penetration to our judiciary. You imagine that official decoration increases human sagacity and sharpens the perception. It is quite the other way. Badges of office have the effect of inflating egotism to such a degree that judgment is corrupted. The assumption is that the accused is guilty, and under our remarkable system of jurisprudence proof of innocence is substituted for proof of guilt. What proof of her innocence can 'Toinette offer to support her declaration? She could tell her story in court as she has told it to me; but under our methods of interrogatory, her defence could be twisted into a self-condemnation.

Ah! I see you are already convinced of the soundness of my reasoning, and I need not pursue the argument to its limit. In brief, then, Madame Clifton must be silenced. If she will not sign a paper incriminating herself——”

“I do not believe she will do that.”

“Then the alternative.”

“I don’t believe she will take the initiative you fear.”

“She will, unless the de Noels will submit to her dictation.”

“Well, even that were better than that you should——”

“What are you thinking of? The idea is revolting. Look you. In the rue Bonaparte there is an atelier where a remarkably skilful craftsman fashions images of saints for the Church—Josephs and Virgins and Genevieves, and the rest of them—mere shapes of wood and plaster—insensate things; emotionless, passionless—objects of sale and barter. But buy one of those senseless effigies, my friend, and set it up at the entrance to a house of tolerance, and the mob of Paris will rend you in pieces and raze your house to the foundation bricks. That for the profanation of an ideal! Good God!” He pushed back from the table and rose, gripping the chair strenuously, his face passionate, his voice menacing. “If it be a sacrilege, an unpardonable outrage to make that

use of an image, even though it may have been carved by a Brittany peasant, shall it be less an affront to Heaven and honesty to see a pure woman put to a like shameful service! We will say no more about it. My resolution is taken. How will you have your coffee? Natural or with milk?"

"With milk."

The coffee was making over a spirit-lamp, and, as he went to draw me a cup, the street bell rang.

"Joseph. I can put it to his credit that he is expeditious. Excuse me while I let him in."

It was not Joseph, however, but a *petit-bleu*, which, on his return, Levignet tossed to me in silence as he passed to the coffee urn.

There was only the line:

"Madame Clifton will not sell. M. Levignet need not call."

"Laconic, isn't it?" asked Levignet.

"What do you understand from it?"

"The mouse has smelt the cat."

"What will you do now?"

"I mean to have a cup of coffee—two, if it tastes as good as it smells. I paraphrase Sancho Panza to say, 'God bless the man who first invented coffee.' I believe the medical fraternity are not agreed as to its beneficence; but I shall be careful to avoid anything the medical gentlemen agree to commend. Um? How is it?"

"Quite worthy of—Suzel."

"It is her method. I learned a deal from the dear old pig-headed, foolish virgin. Did I tell you that I have located her?"

"No. Have you?"

"Yes. She took herself and her savings to an attic back of the Madeleine. Suzel was a thrifty soul and has more than enough for her simple needs. But she misses me nearly as much as I miss her. The stupid creature has drawn into a shell. I've had a talk with the concierge. Fidelity of affection is the rarest jewel in the human coffer, friend Summerville, and I must find a way to recover old Suzel. She has hands like claws, but I would rather have them to close down my eyelids when I can no longer close them for myself, than the softest fingers I have ever touched—unless it might be those of—— Ah! That is Joseph this time, certainly."

The bell brought him out of the pleasant melancholy into which he was drifting, and he went with exceptional alacrity to let in Joseph, who brought a bundle of cigars.

"We'll keep these for another time," said Levignet, re-entering the room. "I remember to have some better ones in my workshop. Let us go try them. Refill the cups, Joseph, and fetch them in to us."

Levignet led the way to his "workshop," and

when he had set a box of Havanas before me he asked permission to use the telephone, and called up the Prefect of Police.

"*M. le Prefet?*" he demanded, when the response came. "Ah! yes. It is Levignet. Exactly. I want a favour at your hands. Thank you. You are very obliging. Will you send two of your men to my house to-night at 9 o'clock sharp, to act under my orders? No. Merely a bit of diplomacy. A little nonsense of my own. In uniform, yes. Thank you. We'll touch glasses at the Café Cardinal, if you'll dine with me to-morrow. What's that? You *biberon!* You wish to ruin me. But I submit. Only I shall ask a further favour. Send me a blank warrant, a *prise de corps*, signed by yourself. Oh, never mind the *légalité*. It will serve my purpose. *Fi donc!* I am too old for pranks of that sort. It is a jest of another pattern. Eh? Word of honour. You will never hear of it except from me. Yes! Yes. I assure you. That is extremely pretty of you. Thanks infinitely. You shall rummage the cellar of the Cardinal to your heart's content. Ah! *farceur!* Heart and stomach are the same with you, you say? Chut! Chut! I shall not listen to you." He laughed, and broke the communication.

"What are you going to do with policemen and warrants?" I asked as he turned to take up the

cup of coffee which Joseph had brought in while he was talking.

"I am going to keep my ten o'clock appointment with Madame Clifton."

"You mean to give her in charge?"

"Oh, dear no, innocent young man! I shall only play what you Americans call the bluff. It will insure me an interview with Madame, and that is all I ask."

"But if she is not at home?"

"I shall await her return. Come, come, *mon enfant*, put off that unwholesome countenance. You give me an uncomfortable desire to turn you into the street. You are as unsociable as a wet blanket. Let us remember that the day is a God-send of beauty, and make something of it. I have the afternoon at my disposal, and I wish to be glad in it. If you can bring your good-humour into the foreground, I'll keep company with you; otherwise, I must take leave of you. Which will it be—an arm-in-arm stroll in the sunshine or *au revoir*?"

"I mean to keep with you."

"Truly? Then put on a smile and your hat. We'll go to your hotel if you wish to change your linen, for we may care to drop into the Bazaar to buy a buttonhole flower—if our purses are long enough. By the way, do you ever lounge in the Parc Monceau?"

"I have visited it."

"It isn't what it was in the old days, but it is still the most picturesquely romantic jewel in the ornamental charm of Paris. This is the children's hour. I love to sit in a shady nook of la Naumachie and watch them, listen to them, join sometimes in their frolics. I have gone there many a time to sweeten myself from the reek of vulgarity. Let us stroll that way. I want the tonic of childish laughter."

XXXV

IN the company of an enthusiast of beauty the Parc Monceau is indeed the spring of imagination. The exquisite display of flowers and rare plants, the expanse of water wind-rippling to the base of the semicircle of ivy-mantled, bough-embowered Corinthian columns named la Naumachie, the tangle of noble trees and the utter freedom from reminders of the mean and sordid, might set the fibres of the dullest nature tingling to the measure of poetry. Levignet breathed deep as we entered through the gilded gates, and as we passed the groups of tiny aristocrats—for they were the butterfly children of the rich who then sported in the loveliness of this fortunate garden—his white hair and beard were suddenly transformed from the badge of age into the fantastic masque of a truant juvenile. Levignet was a boy at heart, and he went back with a rush to the spirit of hoop and top at the slightest hint of circumstance. How often I had seen the transition, and loved him for it! How many memories of this up-leap of young sincerity are precious to me now! The man who keeps ready in his heart the treasure-trove of his clean

boyhood has ransom when the great Audit is made up.

The iron chairs in the shadow of a broken column, half hidden in ivy, invited us to sit down within speaking distance of a trio of dainty mid-gets labouring at heaps of gravel with a shovel the size of a spoon. Levignet gave them directions, and even aided them with his stick, until by degrees their busy toil edged them away from us to raise heaps further down the path, which they builded, laughing.

"Ah! Summerville, someone has said there is nothing half so holy in life as the innocent laugh of a child. And it is true. Something renovating goes through one to hear it. They are the 'young-eyed Cherubins' of your Shakespeare, and I have an idea that their delicate, pure ears catch sometimes the harmony of the singing orbs which the 'muddy vesture of decay' shuts from the souls of us worldings. You remember the lines I mean?

" 'There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed Cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls:
But, whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it."

Ah! *chere petite!* "

One of the children running along the path stumbled and fell, driving her plump hands

cruelly against the fine gravel; but before she had quite made up her mind to cry, Levignet was lifting her to her feet, cheering her with endearments, and making such an indignant clamour against the naughty path for having thrown her, punishing the ground with his stick, that the little one forgot the occasion for tears and, laughing at the funny man, went back to her play with increased mirthfulness.

"You are so fond of children," I said, when Levignet came back to his chair, "I wonder you never married, to have a family of your own."

It was a remark in jest, but Levignet, beating the toe of his boot with his stick, answered slowly and in regretful tone:

"I have dream children of my own—always young, always clambering on my knees to fling their arms about my neck and snuggle their faces in my beard. It has been so for thirty years, ever since the dream began, ever since I knew it was only to be a dream. I have never told you. There is always some corner of the heart that we use as a shrine, where no one lights a candle but ourselves, and where we go in solitude to kneel before the altar of memory."

He leaned over, resting his forehead on his hands clasped on the silver top of his heavy stick. After a silence, which I respected, he went on talking, without raising his head, so that I scarcely

knew whether he was confiding his thoughts to me or speaking unconscious of my presence.

"I was twenty-five. Elise was coming to her eighteenth birthday, the day appointed for our marriage. The house in which I now live was chosen by her; together we furnished it, though for the most part it was her fancy that was followed. The home is the woman's world. It pleased me to have her say how things should be. But it was her mother who pulled me by the ear and whispered in her friendly way, 'This room shall be the children's room, Marcel, my son; and you must let me put it ready for my grand-children.' We were very merry when we came to make up the list of guests; but there was a name we did not write down, and He, the Unbidden, was the only guest who came. It was the Carnival week, too: She was so in love with the frank gaieties of life, she was so much a part of the sweet sunshine, that it seemed strange, strange that the echoes of mirth from the boulevards did not wake her as we followed her through the still and empty streets winding away from the mad happiness toward the City of Silence. It was my first ride to Père Lachaise. I have been so many times since. Soon I shall go again. It is well to have waited and been waited for for thirty years. It is good to have dreamed and kept faith with your dreams. And if to the dream of youth

has been added an illusion of age—well, to have been faithful it is necessary that one should have been human too.”

His voice had sunk to a barely distinguishable murmur, and I had leaned nearer to hear him, when he raised his head with a sudden nervous jerk, struck his stick against the ground and exclaimed:

“Mon Dieu! Summerville, we are falling asleep! Let us stir our stumps. The children have found us too dull for playfellows, and have deserted us. And I have come without any crumbs in my pockets for the sparrows. There is nothing for it but to tramp. I'll walk with you to the Étoile, if you say so, provided my knee does not suddenly turn refractory. I've a moment's business in the Avenue Kléber. Then we'll take a cab to your hotel, and you shall give me a mouthful of that American whiskey to economise while you touch up your toilet. Happily a bourgeois of my pattern does not have to prink.”

He abandoned himself to a fantastic humour as we idled toward the Arc, and though I listened to him and laughed at him, my mind was tormented by its vain efforts to devise a scheme to keep him from going to the meeting with Madame Clifton that night. My abstraction acted as a spur to his mischievous spirit, or else he was trying to obliterate from his own mind the melancholy of

his semi-reverie in the park, for he joked with street urchins, bandied words with pedlars, took in hand a carter's balking horse, and altogether was as little like the sober M. Levignet as any gamin. In the Avenue Hoche we came upon a street singer, a blind, dark-headed Apollo, still young, playing his own accompaniment on a reputable violin, a woman old as the sibyl holding by the skirt of his coat and offering leaflets of his songs for sale. I had heard this chanson d'Amour piped by a metallic tenor in one of the free music halls, but the rich cadence of the man's mellow baritone gave soul and character to air and words, a touching pathos to the double refrain, "*Pourquoi partir, Ninon; pourquoi partir,—Ninon!*"

Levignet stopped in front of the singer, who had a scattered audience of ten or a dozen persons none too willing to part with their sous, enjoying but holding aloof.

"Excellent, my friend," said Levignet, in French, when the song was done. "You have given me true pleasure. You have a voice for better things. Is it not so, my friends?" he asked, turning to the people near him. "One pays for art in Paris; is it not so? I have paid twenty francs for worse at the Opera. Shall we recompense our artist? Come; I will set the example."

He took off his hat and dropped into it a five-

franc piece, and then, with an inviting smile, held it to the right and left about him, moving here and there, crossing the street to a lady who laughingly held up a franc to tempt him, the blind singer and his old mother clinging together in their astonishment, with nothing more eloquent to say than a varied repetition of "Monsieur."

"There, mother," said Levignet, emptying his hat into the woman's apron; "you see the people love music. For me, I love it best in the open."

"The good God is in your heart, monsieur," quavered the old woman, in thin child's voice.

"In the hearts of all of us, mother, did we but know it."

"Monsieur," said the singer, "is it too much to ask that I may shake hands with you?"

"Are we not brothers?" asked Levignet, clasping the outstretched hand.

We went on up the Avenue, Levignet less prankish than he had been, and the voice of the singer came after us in a more ambitious song; but the words and the tune were still to my inner hearing the haunting refrain of the other melody, grown mysteriously and sombrely prophetic.

"Pourquoi partir? pourquoi partir?"

XXXVI

IF you will sit on that bench there," said Levignet, when we had crossed the Place de l'Étoile, "you will find it more amusing than cooling your heels in an anteroom while I am closeted with Maitre Bordone. I'll not keep you waiting long enough to bore you. Take a cigar for company."

He left me seated and entered the Avenue Kléber. This Maitre Bordone was the advocate who had charge of Levignet's affairs; and, though I knew that the newspaper, financial investments and enterprises of less importance gave Levignet excuse enough for consulting his lawyer, the call at the private residence, in the middle of the afternoon, suggested to me that the visit was by appointment for business of a more intimate character than usual. But as he chose to leave me ignorant of his object, I rebuked my curiosity in the beginning of its speculation, and fell to reviewing my relations with Levignet to the time when our acquaintance began so accidentally. It was six or eight years before. I had been strolling along the grand boulevards, and was inattentively crossing to the Porte Saint Martin, when suddenly I felt myself seized by the collar and jerked violently

back, just as a motor—wildly driven, as in the early days of unrestricted motoring was the practice with arrogant chauffeurs—rushed past. Though I had been saved from injury, possibly from extinction, I was inclined to be angry with the person who had handled me so uncereemoniously, and turned rather sharply on my rescuer. One resents being made ridiculous by a liberty, even at the profit of life, and the consciousness that I had blundered like a yokel made me the more eager to justify my intelligence.

“What the devil do you mean, monsieur,” I demanded in loud voice, “by assaulting me in this fashion!”

“You were about to be run over, monsieur,” said Levignet, for Levignet it was, with a smile of irritating good-humour.

“That was my affair, monsieur,” I retorted, readjusting my coat and receiving my hat picked up by a woman.

“Pardon me, monsieur, but I did not wish to see a mess in our beautiful street.” He lifted his hat and was passing on, the people about laughing at his sally, when good sense got the better of my caddishness. I laughed foolishly, gave the grinning woman a *pourboire* and overtook my nonchalant saviour.

“Monsieur, be good enough to attribute my bad manners to surprise not altogether free from fear.

The shock, you understand—I am most grateful to you.”

He looked at me, his eyes twinkling, his moustaches spreading with the smile under them.

“ I am sorry to see, monsieur, that I a little disarranged your necktie. Will you permit me? ”

He set the tie right with a touch, and we went down the boulevard together, presently arm-in-arm to prevent our separation by the throng. So began an acquaintance that rapidly ripened into intimacy, for, as Levignet put it, “ what seemed a chance encounter was really a directed reunion of spirits that had been congenial in a forgotten past.” He laughed as he said it, but, as I have more than once intimated, Levignet was a believer in inscrutable things. For me he wore his heart on his sleeve; to the world at large he was as much an enigma as any of his fellow worldings. To be downright open and expansive now and then, throwing off reserve and letting the native man break through the armour of convention that mutual distrust and jealousy have welded on us, is a privilege which all men covet, but which few have the courage or the opportunity to enjoy. Levignet gratified his need of occasional self-discovery in the freedom of his talks with me. I came to such a knowledge of him through these unguarded avenues of sentiment that I was taught to recognise in my own heart an unsuspected capa-

city of tenderness for the mixed caravan journeying across the oasis-dotted desert of Time toward the hostel of Eternity. The best in one's nature always responds to the sincerity of another—and Levignet might have declared with de Maistre—“I love everyone that lives, and even inanimate things have part in my affections. I love the trees that bestow their shade on me, and the birds that gossip in the leafage; I love the nocturnal cry of the owl and the roar of rushing waters; I love everything—I love the moon. You laugh. It is easy to turn into ridicule the sentiments that you have never experienced; but the heart that resembles mine will understand me.”

It was better than the love of woman to have known and understood Marcel Levignet.

“Hello! day-dreaming?”

Levignet had approached without my notice, and his words were accompanied by a thrust of his stick against my side.

“M. Bordone was ready for me, so I have not to apologise for keeping you waiting; but you are a sleepy-head by nature.”

“I wasn't asleep. I was thinking.”

“It is a vice to think with your eyes shut when there is so much brightness and animation about you. Come; pull yourself to your feet. I've mapped out a programme for the afternoon. It

is now but a little after three. We'll drive to your hotel, that you may make yourself irresistible, and then drop into the Bazaar for half-an-hour, if our funds hold out so long. Afterwards we'll take a constitutional in the Bois. At five o'clock a bateau, have an early dinner at an excellent little restaurant, with a charming river terrace, kept by one of my father's old servants. He has an admirable faculty for doing things to please me. At seven we return to Paris in an open carriage, and at eight-thirty I'll bid you good-night and set you free of my company. How does the arrangement suit you?"

"Capitally, except for the 'good-night.' We must amend that part of it."

"Positively, no. I shall have pumped you dry by that time, and have no further use for you. An empty man is like an empty bottle—an irritating strain on the nervous system. Get in."

We took our places in the fiacre he had stopped, and drove to the hotel. On the way Levignet gave me a small sealed packet.

"This is something Bordone has been keeping for me these many years. The idea occurred to me that you might find a wrist for it some day. I bought it years ago for a purpose. I should like you to have it. Humph! Is Marcel a name you Americans ever give to your children? There is such a devil of a bother choosing names sometimes.

I had a cousin who was called Hibou as long as he lived, for the reason that to every name in or out of the family proposed for his christening, my uncle opposed a disdainful 'chouette.' As 'chouette' also means a kind of owl, 'Owl' my unlucky cousin became, and was finally laughed into his grave with it. Poor devil of a Hibou! A man's name, let me tell you, has an undoubted influence upon the formation of his character."

"I believe you."

"You have no prejudice against the name Marcel?"

"On the contrary, I like it."

"Ah! well. You may have a boy some time. Who knows?"

"May I open this packet?"

"Of course."

Breaking the seal, I uncovered a morocco case, in which was a beautifully jewelled bracelet, a single stone of great value caught in an exquisite lacework of golden leaves.

"My dear Levignet—" I exclaimed in astonishment, holding the bracelet to catch the sunlight, "why do you give me this?"

Looking up at the equestrian statue of Jeanne d'Arc which we were just passing, he replied, lightly:

"It was bought for a wedding present. Give it to Madame Summerville on your marriage

morning. Ha! it has been too long hidden away in the darkness. There is a sort of crime in keeping gems secreted from the light from which they extract such wonderful beauties. The vulgar world holds the opinion that the progress of civilisation is marked by commercial stadia; as a matter of fact it is measured by the jeweller's microscope. Profusion is barbarism; selection is art; art is the touchstone of civilisation; and the highest of all arts is the proper cutting and setting—mind, I say proper—of nature's perfected minerals and metals. Your stockbrokers, and fishmongers, and politicians will not admit as much; nor will those queer creatures who achieve a sort of celebrity by their knowledge of Greek roots or their acquaintance with the chemical values of guanos; but the proof of my statement lies in the fact that among the arts the jeweller's enjoys the pre-eminent distinction of being the only one that is not utilitarian. A picture is a substitute for wall paper; a statue breaks an expanse, defines an angle or corrects a vacancy; but a jewel, properly speaking, is as useless as a lily or a rose or the smile on a baby's lips—yet these things are more precious than all the ships that go out to sea and all the heaped-up stones that make a city of palaces."

"You forget music among the arts, Levignet."

"Oh! my God! Summerville, are you a Bæotian! Music among the arts! The miracu-

lous voice of Nature and the soul, that is everywhere intelligible and potent, an art! In that sphere, my friend, the more art the less music, the less inspiration. The Great Musician has a thousand instruments—Norway pines and Lombardy poplars—Alpine torrents and meadow rivulets—the roar of winds in caverns or over the hills of the driven sea—bird song and midge hum—a thousand thousand instruments that make more wonderful music than all your fiddles and trumpets and drums and tinkling or droning keyed-machines can counterfeit. I will allow you to call music a science—an inexhaustible science—but I quarrel with the man who insists upon calling it an art. An art is perfectible by the hand of man; God alone can perfect music. I am ready for that mouthful of whiskey you promised me."

XXXVII

FOLLOWING Levignet's programme, we started a little before four o'clock for the rue Jean Coujon and the Charity Bazaar. Neither of us had a great liking for crowds, even those of "Tout Paris," but to Levignet 'Toinette's playful appeal to "come and buy" was a mandate, and obedience to it was not only a duty but a pleasure. He was in his best mood of effervescent good-nature, and had a jest or an anecdote for every historic house or monument we passed in our circuitous drive. In the Place des Victoires, over which Louis XIV, robed and crowned as a demi-god, seems forever on the point of plunging his massive stallion, he said with a chuckle:

"I never think of the glories of our Louis when I see that statue. On the contrary, I strip him of the sacred robe and set him in velvet coat and knee-breeches in front of an old Swiss gardener, among the flower beds of the Parc Monceau when it was a royal pleasure-ground. Old Schoene, the gardener, was a character. He loved three things jealously in the order of their importance—the king, a short-stemmed black pipe, and his flowers.

Schoene smoked as he breathed; he would as readily have been deprived of his nose as of his pipe, and he made no more of blowing smoke into the face of his Majesty than into the petals of a rose. But on this morning of which I speak, Louis was accompanied by the queen and one of the princesses; and when they came upon Schoene, who continued to puff away at his pipe while responding to questions, the king, who loved the old fellow, thought a reprimand necessary. 'Mark you, Schoene,' he said severely, 'I let it pass that you smoke in my presence; I cannot, however, pardon the affront to her Majesty and her Highness. Throw away that pipe.' Not a bit of it. The old fellow straightened himself up as best he could, and, still puffing between his words, replied slowly, 'If his Majesty is displeased with me as a gardener he may send me away. It would break my heart, but I should die with my pipe between my teeth.' Louis looked at him a moment, laughed, clapped him on the shoulder indulgently, and said, 'Eh! well, my friend, smoke your pipe!' That is the way I like to think of Louis. They may toss all his grand exploits and vain-glorious conquests into the river Lethe, if they will leave me that incident in proof of his manhood. Is it not extraordinary that artists always seize on the grandiose and ignore the human when they set about immortalising the memory of a man? Could

anything be more ridiculous and incongruous than that romanesque, ramping effigy of Louis we have just seen? A sun-dial would have been as much to the purpose. But we French have a passion for men on horseback. A mannikin on a Normandy mare could sweep us to the devil in our enthusiasm if he had impudence enough to ride down a few of us first. Positively, the strangest thing in human nature is the way mankind prostrates itself before the impotent idols of its own creation. The secret of it is that we must worship something, and since we cannot content ourselves with an invisible, and, therefore, possibly non-existent God, we—what was the word I heard you use the other day? Ah! I remember—we bamboozle ourselves by putting our fellow-mortals on pedestals and burning incense before them. Demos was, is, and ever will be a drivelling idiot. He deserves that the man-on-horseback should have his animal shod with spiked brass. Here we are; and not the first to arrive, either."

The street was choked with carriages, and our approach to the stretch of wooden sheds that cheaply imitated the street scenes of the seventeenth century was so hindered that we alighted and made our way to the doors on foot.

It was the second day of the benevolent enterprise so successfully promoted by the ladies of the *haut ton*, and the bourgeoisie, which always waits

to see which way the wind blows, was oppressively represented.

"This is rather more than I bargained for," Levignet complained as we edged our way along the main passage between the stalls. "If I have an eye for a crowd, there are five thousand people. How is one to get a look at beauty, when he is busy keeping his feet off the trail of her gown! Everyone is dressed as if she were arrayed for the Grand Prix, which is abominable. I, who was built to walk with a stride, must mince my steps like a dancing master. It is tantalising. But you would come."

"I would come, Levignet!"

"It is too late to argue the matter. We must make the best of it. Ah! look there to your right. The venerable lady surrounded by a bevy of pretty women. It is the Duchess d'Alençon, type of our French noblesse in the great days—epitome of our best traditions—*une vraie grande dame*. Napoleon said that the chief need of France was mothers; yes, of that pattern. Had the court ladies of the last two Louis been women of the Duchess d'Alençon's stamp, Napoleon would never have mounted the throne of the Bourbons, for there would have been no Revolution to clear the way for him."

"Which would have been a pity, all things considered."

"That is as one may think. For my own part, I am of the opinion that the strength and integrity of a country may be measured by the purity of its women. Ah! here is your opportunity to buy me a cigar-case that I shall never use. The cheapest of them will do. I believe in homœopathic phlebotomy, as far as you have the choice. Thank you, madame, I prefer this one. My friend will pay you. Be as charitable with him as your goodwill for your sister stall-keepers will allow, for we wish to distribute our patronage. You are right; it all falls into one bag in the end—but there is more pleasure in scattering crumbs to the sparrows than in throwing them a whole loaf at once. Besides, madame, I am an amateur of smiles; and, charming as yours are, I would sample the assortment,"—he lifted his hat,—“even though I must return at last to you.”

“Polichinelle!” said the lady good-naturedly, and turned to other patrons.

A few stalls further, we were impeded by a crowd viewing some object evidently of amusing interest. Levignet stood on tiptoe to peer over the heads, and said as we pushed on:

“It is the booth of the sprightly Duchesse d’Uzes. You have heard of her in connection with the Boulanger tragi-comedy. Not a bad social engineer, her Grace; plenty of zest, some wit, and rather ready with her pen; but when it comes to

the political perimetre, the feminine sense of proportion——”

I did not heed the finish of his sentence, for my attention was attracted to a booth we were passing by a laughing voice that touched a chord of recent memories. Looking into the stall, where several ladies were talking with bargaining friends, I caught a glimpse of brilliant eyes in which was a scornful pride that seemed to temper the sensuous beauty of lips I could have picked out of ten thousand.

I pulled Levignet brusquely by the arm, and whispered into his ear:

“Look! the woman in the middle there. It is my lost ‘Helen of Troy.’”

He looked as I directed him.

“Impossible!” he exclaimed. “You are dangerously mistaken.”

“I will swear to her.”

“First you will jump from the Eiffel Tower. The lady is——” He whispered a name in my ear. “You see it is impossible—or, what comes to the same thing, you must think of it as impossible. Along with you. I have located ‘Toinette.’”

He dragged me away with him, urging his way toward the stall where ‘Toinette’ shone pink-robed among her assistants. It was some time before Levignet could get a word with her, her wares——

editions de luxe, autograph books, signed sketches by well-known artists, etc.—possibly, the beauty of herself and the young ladies with her—holding quite her share of the money-spending throng. But it mattered little to Levignet. He was content to stand in beaming contemplation of her face, scarcely desisting when he exchanged vivacious remarks with friends who chanced to drift by him.

But for the risk of being separated from Levignet, and so losing him for the evening, I should have seized the occasion to return to "Helen of Troy," for his whispered warning had piqued instead of extinguishing my zest of adventure. I had a mind to play my impudence against the scorn of those black eyes, flattering myself that I had the wit to steer clear of breakers. I was half unconsciously easing away from Levignet, when he touched my shoulder with the top of his stick.

"*La voila*," he said.

"Who?" I asked.

"Madame Beelzebub."

He tipped his stick slightly, pointing to the left. Three stalls away, I saw Madame Clifton, a picture of sedate benevolence, having the air of the presiding genius of all the Charities.

"Marvellous woman!" he muttered, in a tone of sincere admiration. "Have I not said that

she could make a fool of Sarah at her own trade? What a pity she missed the door."

A swirl of the crowd brought us opposite 'Toinette, and she obligingly turned from gossip with an unproductive group to greet Levignet, curving out an ungloved hand to him.

"So you did come to save me from neglect, *bon ami!* And M. Summerville, too. How good of you both."

"You are wrong, Baroness; it is not to Fortunata we come with our mites. We are in search of the stall of the deserted lady."

"Then you must push your way into the street, and look for her at a church door," 'Toinette laughed. "But is it not divine, the fervour of our Parisians to befriend the poor?"

"Ah! Baroness, if it were that!"

"Miserable! to bring your scepticism here. Take him away, M. Summerville, before he corrupts my patrons."

"Not until I know the price of this book that excites my cupidity." He held up a dainty volume of de Musset.

"To another, fifty francs; to you three hundred—not a centime less, infidel."

"Ridiculously cheap. It is mine. And I will add another hundred if you will scribble a presentation line on the fly leaf."

"A presentation line?"

"Yes—I suddenly remember that I am to have a birth anniversary to-night. You can't refuse to make me a present of your autograph."

She took up a gold pencil suspended from her waist and wrote a line.

"You might have had it as a gratuity," she said, smilingly handing him the book, "but as the servant of Charity, I dare not profane an offering by declining it."

Levignet glanced at the writing—"Happiness to the friend I most esteem—'Toinette"—held it before my eyes and exclaimed, "Have I not the best of the bargain, friend Summerville! But I cannot rest in a lady's debt, dear Baroness. I improvise a fête in celebration of my birthday and bid you and the Baron to honour it. Will you come?"

"When?"

"To-night at eleven."

"Very well, where?"

"Hotel Foyot. I sacrifice fashion to gastronomy. Besides, it is an anniversary habit. I owe that much to the Rive Gauche. Ghosts of my youth keep carnival there. They must find me faithful, eh?"

"Are none of them troublesome? Ghosts are such egotists."

"Not my sort, Baroness. My memory is discriminating. I give you my word I have never

had a nightmare, nor an accusing regret. Let your mind be tranquil. I do not invite you to a Macbeth banquet, but to a revel of laughing phantoms—will-o'-the-wisps of Bohemia!"

"In that case, count on me."

"And the Baron?"

"Naturally."

Toinette divided a smile of good-fellowship between us and gave her attention to other patrons, Levignet and I falling in with the drift of the crowd, my spirits exalted by the arrangement for a supper at the Foyot. I expressed my satisfaction.

"Are you so gourmand?" asked Levignet.

"It is not that; my gratification is in your change of programme."

"Change! Extension. I have but added another item to round out the symphony."

"Even so, the fact that you plan for a jolly evening argues——"

"*'Carpe diem,' mon enfant.* Enjoy the day. To the devil with arguments. One plans for pleasure in the hope that the Goddess Chance may take care of the plan. If the sequences be disordered—*soit!* anticipation counts for something in the cycle of destiny. Good heavens! imagine life stripped of its illusions! Ah! stop a moment."

We were in front of Madame Clifton's booth, and he drew me aside to it. Madame and her two

young helpers were selling flowers for corsage and buttonhole, and Levignet took up a sprig of lilac which he inspected without appearing to be aware who was in charge of the booth.

"Ten francs at the least, I warrant you," he said speculatively eyeing the sprig and its knot of ribbon.

"Twenty, Monsieur Levignet."

Levignet looked up, and affected surprise on seeing the speaker.

"Ah! Madame Clifton, it is you! Good luck. I take it as a happy omen that I stumble on your stall for my boutonniere."

"How so, monsieur?" Madame asked, her hard lips scarcely softening in a smile.

"Why, these flowers are an augury of the felicity that is to come to me with your incomparable carriage horses, madame."

"I sent you word that I had concluded not to sell."

There was just a perceptible unpleasantness in her casual tone, but Levignet did not seem to detect it. He nodded smilingly.

"Oh! I understood, of course, that your note was a courteous intimation that I had undervalued your treasure; but,"—he put down the twenty francs for the sprig already in his buttonhole,—“if I cheerfully pay double the estimated price for a posy that pleases me, you may be sure that I shall

not hesitate to give full value for the thing I may happen to think necessary to my happiness."

Madame gave a little laugh that was almost mirthful. She seemed about to put into words the mockery that glinted in her eyes, and Levignet tilted his head expectantly. But as she paused on a "Well, monsieur," someone called to her from the other end of the stall. She glanced in that direction, nodded and moved away from us. Levignet raised his hat in a parting salute of which she was unconscious.

"Misguided woman," he sighed, and lifting the lapel of his coat inhaled the fragrance of the lilacs. "What a pity," he added, "that a woman's cleverness so generally reacts on herself."

He took my arm and we made our way gradually to the exit and passed out into the free air. It was good to escape from the oppression of an atmosphere charged with all the drowsy perfumes that gay women love.

"Dieu!" exclaimed Levignet, inflating his lungs. "I am more than ready for our drive in the Bois. What in the name of the legion of saints would become of the Parisian if he did not have that superb laboratory of nature in which to restore his chemical waste! I grant you that he does not always go there with an intelligent purpose to conserve physical energy or develop moral stamina; but what of that? If in the chase of

Folly you run into the embrace of Hygeia, why quarrel with the incentive? Here is a suitable cab. Take your place. An hour in the Bois, *cocher*. And, if you please, friend Summerville, let us drive in the fellowship of silence. I have the instinct of what you would say, and I am not in a combative humour. The scent of these lilacs under my nose calls up a memory of my youth. I shall slip into Arcady, listen to old Pan piping to the water nymphs, and possibly dance with divinities in gossamer. It is a familiar pastime with me. If you buzz me into consciousness before I round out my reverie, I'll dump you by the wayside and dine without you—sorry as I should be to leave you unacquainted with the excellent André's cuisine. Is it understood?"

"Oh! I think I can manage to scare up a reverie of my own."

"Sensible fellow. We may compare notes afterwards. A man seldom dips well down into himself without bringing something valuable to the surface. The whole secret of life lies in the knowledge how to explore the wonderland of self. The philosopher's '*Ton gnothe*' is the end-all and mend-all for which the silly alchemists fired their crucibles in vain. The only difference between you and me and the fat imbecile on the box there, is in the faculty of introspection. *Allons, donc!* Let us indulge our superiority."

XXXVIII

THAT Levignet should go to the ends of the earth for a dinner seemed to be a freakish bit of business, until we were settled at a table on the terrace of the "Little White Cottage," which was neither white nor a cottage, but a grey-toned mystery of haphazard architecture overrun with creepers. The terrace, sheltered from the sun by a canopy of ivied lattice-work, went down to the water's edge, the barrier of loose stone being scarcely a foot above the wash of the river. From where we sat there was hardly a house to be seen and Paris was a century away. Men and boys, clad only in breeches, were sporting in the river, a huge black, noisy dog in the frolic, women and girls on the bank enjoying the spectacle, calling out jests to the swimmers, throwing sticks for which dog and boys contended. Further out in the stream some young people in boats seemed bent on a general capsizing and went rocking and drifting by, the girls nervous and shrieking to the mischievous laughter of their tormentors. The ensemble was as near an approach to Arcadian joy, simplicity and charm as civilisation knows how to make, and I should not have

been greatly surprised to see Levignet plunge in to wanton among the amphibians.

"Well?" demanded my friend, viewing my satisfaction, "can you forgive me for whipping you away from the adventures of the rue Royale and its fashion plates?"

"*Farceur!*"

André, proprietor of the "Little White Cottage," round and short, with clean double chin nearly obscuring his fresh white collar and tie, his stout legs straining at their black casing, came trotting from the house beaming with pride and affection as he panted out apologies for not having been ready to welcome his "*tres cher ami et bon patron*" at the door. He accused himself unsparingly as he shook Levignet's hand; telling me that he would not esteem a visit from the President as honourable to him and his house as the presence of "this foremost of men who has now to pardon my first affront"; declaring that his infidelity would cost him an age of regrets; laughing, chattering and wiping away tears in a joyous self-abasement to which he seemed prepared to sacrifice the remainder of the afternoon.

"I swear, André, you will make me repent of coming if you slander yourself with another word," Levignet succeeded in making him understand.

"Then I should repent of having been born," André replied, falling back into an attitude of

respectful attention to order. "When the son of Prosper Levignet commands, it is the pleasure of André Laroche to obey."

"Not at all, old friend. You must give M. Summerville no false impressions of our thirty years of fraternity."

"Fraternity! Ha! you heard him say 'fraternity,' monsieur, so I do not presume. But shall I tell you what he means by 'fraternity'?"

"Have a care, André. We come to dine with you, not to listen to a discourse on terms. I am hungry. No trifling with appetites that come so far for service."

"Your appetite shall be flattered, have no fear. I have not been idle since your note came. But 'fraternity' between Marcel Levignet and André Laroche! Monsieur shall judge."

"You would waste your breath, my good André, my friend here is an American; he will not understand your French. If you would have him know how unworthy I am to be your brother, you must find a way to tell him in English."

"Ah! Marcel Levignet, you will yet manage to break my heart. You choke me off always the same; but some day I shall speak. And if you will pardon me for saying it, monsieur," André looked as sorrowfully at me as the good-natured round of his face would permit, "no gentleman should be ignorant of French. It is a

crime not to understand the language in which the good God first spoke to man."

Levignet laughed as I looked blankly out on to the river as if I had not understood.

"That is true, André, but you see how little my friend appreciates it. You must reason with him through the stomach. What have you to eat?"

"Leave all to me. You shall see if those fellows who give themselves airs in Paris have a monopoly on the art of good living. I do not profess to serve all the world alike; but when it comes to tickling the palate of a certain Marcel Levignet—well, the *Élysées* chef may take off his cap to old André."

So saying and wagging his head in right self-approval, he trotted into the house, recovering spirits with every bounce.

"You have cheated my curiosity by a cheap trick, Levignet. What act of benevolence is he so eager to proclaim to your credit? He doesn't look like a man who has been in the shadow of the gallows or the chopping block."

"No," Levignet smiled; "it was his father. But do not predicate a romance of which I am the hero on the prattle of this antique infant. The thing was sordid and prosaic enough—one of the commonplaces of low life. You may see something like it any day under the '*Faits Divers*' of

your daily paper. Jean Laroche, André's father, had a passion for absinthe and dribbled his wits away as the water dripped over the sugar into his glass of poison. You know that sort of thing must lead to something. A hammer in the hands of a madman and a woman sleeping in her bed suggest a *dénouement*; Père Lachaise for the woman; Charenton for the man, a natural epilogue. André was then ten—he is five years my senior—and he had a sister of three. My father saw the lad cuddling the babe in his arms, and being of the weakly compassionate order of irrationalists, undertook their protection. That is the whole of it. When my father wearied of the world and left me the heir to the fruits of his industry, in closing out the business I allowed André a trifle which he has multiplied into a snug fortune by ministering to the gluttony of ne'er-do-wells like you and me. Until a year or so ago André kept his wits as orderly as his cash accounts and was content to let me come and go without molestation. But he is dropping prematurely into senility—has lost his sense of proportion—has contracted the disease of gratitude—fancies himself under obligations to me—exalts me into a demi-god of disinterested benevolence—forgets that we were comrades in our artless days and tries to get under my feet—innocently blind to the fact that he has only to scorch my omelette or serve me an under-

done *entrée* to blight the sympathy of years and alienate me forever. He nearly cooked his goose with me a dozen years ago by paying into my bank the principal and interest of the bagatelle I gave him for a start in life. I refused to see him for a twelve-month. Then we compromised, he taking back the pittance and I agreeing to eat dinners with him till the score was cleaned off. An obstinate old chucklehead, but lovable—except for his mania. We must keep him from ridiculous outbursts by speaking English when he hovers over us in solicitude."

A capital dinner timed its courses with the idling down of the sun and the diminuendo of the river noises; and when the cloth was removed for the finishing bottle of wine, there was a silence so serene that we could catch the thin, sharp cheep of the bats venturing into the purple twilight.

André came balancing a crusted bottle which he set on the table with reverence.

"Though there is no label, I can assure you——"

"Chut!" interrupted Levignet. "Do you think, André, that we have no nicer taste than those fantastic amateurs who swear by tagged vintages? I'll risk my digestion on the corner of your cellar from which this bottle came."

André chuckled, carefully wiped the bottle's mouth and filled our glasses, the wine, by some

subtle necromancy of its own, stealing back a faint glow from the invisible sun.

"Fetch a glass for yourself, and drink with us, André."

"I! not for the world."

"It is for my pleasure, imbecile. I wish you to drink my father's health."

André turned without a word and went into the house. When he came again he only half filled his glass, tinkled it against ours and holding it before him said:

"In love of your father, Marcel Levignet, I am on an equality with you. Each of us owes our life to him. You were his son; eh, well! I, too, was his son. Good. I drink to his health—and yours. Levignet, father and son."

He drank, dividing his wine into two swallows, the first with a glance heavenward, then bowing to Levignet. The glass emptied, he shattered it against the edge of the table.

"And they say there is no loyalty left in the hearts of men," Levignet said sotto voce in English. "My father has been dead nearly thirty-six years, and yet this old fellow—well, Summerville, let us drink long life to André Laroche and the dinners of the 'Little White Cottage.'" He dipped his glass toward me and we drank.

André rubbed his hands comfortably together and smiled.

"There is not much more of life left for me and I have no heir to keep up the dinners—but what of that? I have lived; I am alive; when all is done it will suffice if they may write on my tombstone, 'An Honest Man and a Good Cook.'"

"An epitaph Napoleon might envy you, André. Some cigars, if you please."

A little later, while we were smoking alone, enjoying the stillness and the slow deepening of the twilight, Levignet suddenly asked, after some minutes of silence:

"What, to your mind, is the noblest passage in literature, sacred or profane, ancient or modern?"

I had no ready answer, but after some hesitation repeated a passage from Shakespeare. He nodded in appreciation.

"Superb, truly. There is a majesty in your paragon of poets, a grandeur, that makes us feel very little when we measure our intellectual stature by his. But—you will laugh at me, I fear—I think the sublime in literature is not that which fills our minds with wonder at the author's genius, but that which exalts our hearts by the simplicity of its truth. For me there is nothing written that can excel in beauty, in purity, in nobility, this sentence from the New Testament: 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.' It is perfect as an expression of the loftiest possible conception of human privilege."

An indefinable something in his tone impressed me, and prompted me to combat his view.

"That cannot be taken literally as a truth, nor interpreted as a privilege. The conceivable circumstances in which a man may really lay down his life are of so extraordinary a character that they may be said never to arise for the individual. Even the soldier goes into battle nerved by the chance of escape in his favour. Whatever the danger into which a man thrusts himself or is driven, he struggles to preserve his life, hoping for the miraculous when the odds are overwhelming. Man may yield up his life splendidly when the demand is inexorable—nothing in the ordinary course of human experience gives him the privilege of laying it down voluntarily."

"Tut, my dear Summerville," he replied airily, "don't talk in that sterile, orthodox fashion. It puts such a dull limit to the excursions of mind and the expansion of soul. That, my boy, is the philosophy of the nursery, logically, but stupidly, applied to the universal cosmogony. It belongs to the infant reasoning that evolved the Jovian myths. Good heavens! Do you still imagine that divinity is imprisoned by a carcass? Do you fancy that man's egotistic assumption concerning his godhood is really a deistic ordinance? Do you suppose that man's theological theories affect the motion of the spheres? What fatuity! Look at

these bats in their erratic chase of invisible midges—how they vanish as you try in vain to follow their swerves with your eyes. How do you know that one of them has not swerved down into the river as food to the fishes? And what do you care if one has? But is it any more than that when a man takes his plunge and shakes free of the flesh with which his five senses have for a time deluded him? Do you fancy that he is done with life for the plunge? Not a bit of it. He has only changed the combination and seized on the privilege of new experience. Change is not demolition, my friend; neither is death definitive, for life is not an apportionment of years. Our bodies are merely pawns to serve our purposes in the grand game of destiny in which we are more or less intelligent players. What is the sacrifice of a pawn if you establish a winning combination? The game goes on when the pawns are gone. I shall be an entity in spite of the grave. The burial of this body, when I have done with it, will not prevent me going on with my phantasy of self-evolution. And if I may quit my body when disease has made it untenable, may I not quit it when I find it unprofitable? I may change my coat when I please; I can throw it away, if I will—or I may give it to my friend for his protection. Do you think I am less free to do as I please with the surtout that is called my life? Let me say one thing for the

ease of conscience—my reason does not admit the possibility that man can mar, by the most infinitesimal fraction of change, one of God's plans any more than he can stop the revolution of the universe. Man can lay down his life at will; therefore, I must believe that neither the destruction nor the preservation of human life has any bearing on the inscrutable ordering of the divine intelligence. I am willing to think that the Christ saw as clearly into the mystery of existence as mind can penetrate, and by your leave, I shall hold to my opinion that the loftiest conception of human privilege is, that a man may lay down his life for his friend. It is more than my opinion, it is my conviction; and living is more real, significant, glorious in my conception because with that conviction goes a sentimental feeling that would make it as easy and as pleasant for me to kiss my hand in an adieu to life for my friend's sake as it would be to pluck a rose for the adornment of beauty."

"But to take a life, Levignet——"

"We do it daily, hourly. The child running in the innocent joy of a butterfly chase, crushes colonies of peaceful citizens of the clover fields under her dainty feet. It is only egotism that has got us into the way of thinking that man's life is more precious to nature than the life of the gnats our bats are catching over the river. Value lies in

service, my dear infant; and, logically, obstruction impairs value. The survival of the fittest is not a theory, it is an inexorable law of progress. I do not say that the law has my entire approval, but I yield to it, and—— Ah! it is you, Gaspard!”

“At your service, m’sieu’.”

I looked around at the man who had approached from my rear, and as he took off his hat there was light enough on his face for me to recognise a footman I had seen on the box of Madame Clifton’s carriage. I recalled the name as that of the servant who had assisted in the outrage on Levignet.

“Has Madame Clifton sent you to me?”

“No, m’sieu’, I come to warn you.”

“That is very good of you, Gaspard. Warnings always afford me entertainment. What is the nature of yours?”

“This gentleman——” Gaspard hesitated.

“M. Summerville shares my interest in what the immortal Balzac styles the Human Comedy. He is in my confidence; admit him to yours. Begin by telling us how you traced me to this charming retreat, for it hints of cunning, Gaspard, a quality in servants that insures them some sort of elevation. Who knows but you will be Minister of Police, Gaspard?”

“It was simple enough, m’sieu’. I called at

your house and your man said you would dine here. I took the chance of finding you."

"Excellent. You see what it is, Summerville, to have established a reputation of methodical conduct. Had we altered our programme this fine fellow would have been cheated of the reward of noble action and you and I would have missed a zestful finale to our symposium. But I must tax Joseph with indiscretion."

"He only talked when I had convinced him that it was to your interest, m'sieu'."

"Imagine anyone cajoling our foolish old Suzel, friend Summerville! Well, Gaspard, what is it?"

The fellow fumbled with his hat, either reluctant to begin, or uncertain what to say. Finally he stammered out an opening.

"I have always been ashamed of what occurred that day, m'sieu'. But my place has been a good one, I could not throw it away. Well, I have wished to make amends. That is why I come now to tell you what I have heard. Madame and the Marquis were talking this afternoon. It is not my habit to listen; but I heard your name and madame was so angry that—I listened. They have laid a trap for you. They think you will come to madame's house to-night. Well, m'sieu', if you do there will be an 'accident.' They swear you shall not escape alive."

"Ah! they swear that, do they, Gaspard? And you would add to your warning the advice that I postpone my visit to madame?"

"Indefinitely, m'sieu'."

"You are a philosopher, Gaspard, and I should like to take further counsel of you—on terms profitable to yourself. Come into the house with me for a few moments! Wait for me here, Summer-ville. Diana is about due; fancy yourself *Endymion* and beguile the time till I rejoin you."

He went in with Gaspard, and to stretch my legs I left the terrace and strolled along the river bank. Allowing twenty minutes for the conference, I returned to the terrace, but as there was no sign of Levignet, I sat down to a glass of wine and a fresh cigar. The stars were changing from silver to gold in the deepening blue of the sky, dropping nearer and nearer to the tree tops, and there was no sound louder than the splash of an oar on the further side of the river. Some subtle sense of association called up vividly before my mind an altogether different scene—a sweep of the Gulf Coast with the dawn flooding into splendour; a low house with a long verandah, and there at the window a girl's face, wonderful, wistful, looking toward the morning; and yonder by the myrtle hedge a youth looking toward the girl's face, wonderful, wistful. The fragrance of magnolias, the song of the mocking bird, the rippling plash of the bay,

the flash of jewels that the breeze tried to steal from the climbing roses, the glory of the dawn, the light in the woman's eyes and the passion of the youth—what more is needed for an after-dinner reverie? I do not know how long I had been absorbed in it when André roused me by setting a candle on the table.

"I brought the light that you may read the note," he explained.

"What note?"

"The one M. Levignet bade me give you half an hour after he had gone."

"Do you mean to say that M. Levignet is gone?"

"Half an hour ago—fully half an hour ago, but no more; I was exact."

I tore open the note, not a little agitated, nor did I feel reassured by the lines.

"It distresses me to give you the slip, but you know it was according to programme that I should take leave of you at half past eight, and I do not so much anticipate the hour but you can forgive me. However, we are to meet at the Foyot, you remember; and I am going to ask you to oblige me by getting there a little earlier than the appointed time—say 10:30—but do not come in a temper. I find this Gaspard a very sensible fellow. He has saved me no end of trouble. But he is improvident. He refuses some feathers I offer him for his nest. Or it may be that he prefers to garrote me on the way to town. I should be very sorry not to preside at my fête; but if Gaspard or

any other minister of fate deprives me of my felicity, be gracious enough, my dear Summerville, to act as my deputy. Au revoir—and do not attempt the quixotic.

“M. L.”

I felt a chill in the soft air of the evening, I became limp and nerveless. The note fell from my hand to the ground. André stooped anxiously to pick it up.

“Mon Dieu!” he said “why is Monsieur so disturbed? What does the good Marcel say?”

Without asking my leave, he read the lines and laughed, a relieved, good-natured laugh that angered me.

“Ho! Ho! A little joke at the expense of monsieur,” he chuckled.

“A joke at which you will not laugh to-morrow, my friend, so enjoy it while you may.”

I rose and pushed past him as I spoke, hurried to the gate and went out into the highway. André followed, panting in alarm, calling after me, now pleadingly, now threateningly, alternately offering me the blessing of a saint or threatening me with the vengeance of the furies; but though I pitied him afterward, my eagerness to get to Paris compelled me to ignore him then. I never again saw André Laroche, though I dined the other day on the terrace of “La Petite Chaumière Blanche.”

XXXIX

ARRIVED in Paris, I drove straight to Levignet's residence. Joseph opened the door to me and answered my questions without seeming to attach any importance to them. M. Levignet had come home an hour ago, evidently in capital spirits. He had dressed for the evening. He had gone away but a few minutes before I came. No; he had not said where he was going, but he had excused Joseph from waiting up. Yes, he had telephoned to the Prefect of Police, telling him there would be no need to send the men he had promised. Yes, he had said why—he had nothing for them to do, he had changed his plan of entertainment. The Prefect said something at which monsieur laughed, and monsieur invited the Prefect to lunch to-morrow.

“And now, M. Summerville, may I get the card monsieur left for you?”

“Why didn't you get that in the first place, you blockhead?”

“Monsieur forgets that he has been questioning me.”

Joseph bowed to excuse himself and went for the card. It bore but a couple of lines in English in Levignet's fine script.

"I knew you would try to collar me, novice. Go dress for 10:30, Hotel Foyot. Room engaged."

I thrust the card into my pocket and returned to my cab, persuading myself that after all I had little reason to fear any untoward incident as the result of Levignet's eccentric conduct. Apparently something had arisen to alter his purposes. He no longer had a use for the Prefect's men, and he emphasised the appointment for a merry supper at the Foyot. Clearly he was bent on an evening altogether different from that of my gloomy foreboding. Yet why had he stolen away from me in the company of the fellow Gaspard? What was the communication Gaspard had made to him? Was it of a character to strengthen or abate the resolution to which Levignet had committed himself? Was his light humour simulated or genuine? Was the invitation to the Foyot an artifice or bona fide? I could not subdue my doubts in spite of my hopefulness. I tried to think of something worth my doing as I stood hesitating to enter the cab. Mechanically I looked at my watch in the light of the street lamp and found it to be a quarter to nine. A sudden remembrance that nine was the hour at which Levignet had intended to make his call on Madame Clifton, decided me to drive to her address. I gave the cabman the order. It was just nine when I alighted at the door. The

house was dark, but for the dull glow shining through the fanlight. I rang the bell feverishly.

"Madame Clifton?" I demanded when the door was opened by the lackey.

"Not at home, monsieur."

"At what hour is she expected?"

"I cannot say when madame will return, monsieur."

"But madame was prepared for a visit at this hour." The man gave a slight start, and I felt sure that Madame Clifton was in the house.

"It is imperative that I see her," I insisted.

"Are you M. Levignet?" he asked, trying to get a better view of me, as I stood in the shadow.

"Yes," I answered promptly, inferring that he did not know Levignet.

"I was to tell M. Levignet, if he called, that Madame Clifton will—— Pardon me, monsieur, I was to know you by your white hair and moustache. If you will be so obliging as to stand in the light."

"I am not M. Levignet, but I represent him. I come in the interest——"

"Pardon me, monsieur."

The door was closed in my face as I was attempting to enter, but there was no response to my repeated knocks. I could not stand there to create a disturbance, but, certain that Levignet had not yet called, I determined to wait in the neigh-

bourhood and watch for his coming. Sitting in the cab, which I kept crawling up and down the block or loitering at the corners, I let half an hour go by before it occurred to me that Gaspard had prepared Levignet against the very trap into which I was trying, with belated and misdirected zeal, to prevent his falling. With some uncomplimentary reflections on my peculiar astuteness, I gave up the idea of playing guardian to a man so little likely to benefit by my services, and ordered the cabman to drive to my hotel.

That a man's moods change with his dress is, I believe a common experience, and when I had put on my evening clothes my ideas came into harmony with the social pleasantries suggested by that attire. My prophetic vision was rose-coloured; I could hear the musical laughter of 'Toinette, and see the mirthful sparkle in her eyes as she clinked glasses with Levignet and wished him a hundred years' addition to his perennial youth. De Noel's well-bred gravity I fancied giving way to hilarity as Levignet recounted, in satirical humour, the prank he had played on me in the afternoon. Jest and mirth, and gaiety to the splash of champagne, and Levignet's fête night memorable through a score of years! I fell into a nervous impatience to participate in the scene so cheering to my imagination, and arrived at the Foyot a quarter of an hour in advance of my appointed time.

M. Levignet had not yet come, they told me, but the rooms were in readiness if I chose to go up, though supper was not to be served until eleven.

"Yes, I am early; M. Levignet will be here presently, however. I'll wait upstairs."

I was shown to a parlour on the first floor, and, in the room opening from it, the table was laid with four covers, exquisitely decorated, a great mass of pink and white roses spraying out from a central vase. It was very comforting, and with a satisfied sigh, I threw myself into an armchair by the open window of the parlour and lighted a cigarette.

"Monsieur has but to ring," the waiter said, and left me alone.

I could see the Senate clock from where I sat, and I watched the long hand slowly descending to mark the half hour; but before it reached that point the door opened and I turned as Levignet entered.

He wore a light grey overcoat buttoned to the chin, his face was colourless, and he leaned heavily on his stick as he walked from the door. I had risen on seeing him, but he was the first to speak, I was so alarmed by his appearance.

"Ah! you are on time, Summerville. Thank God for that." He sank into a chair and threw his hat aside.

"What's the matter, Levignet?"

"Humph—my knee," he smiled, holding out a

hand to me. "That pestilent Prussian bullet has waked to life. It troubled me to get up the stairs alone, but I wouldn't allow a servant to steal anything from our privacy."

"But a glass of wine——"

"No; I want nothing. Help me to my place at the table. I have a fancy to sit there as I talk. I shall not bore you long. I am not going to be loquacious. Beautiful roses."

He inhaled their fragrance before he sat down, easing himself, as I thought, painfully into the chair.

"You are suffering very greatly, Levignet."

"No, only economising vitality. Sit down. Minutes are precious. I do not know how soon we may be interrupted."

"Let me help you off with your coat."

"Thank you, I'll wear it. My veins are cooling. I feel all my years huddling suddenly on me to-night. Sit down—no, this side; that chair is for 'Toinette. When she comes you must tell her for me——" He paused, giving his moustache the familiar twist that indicated a whimsical turn of thought. "What an egotist she will think me! I am half in the way to believe, dear Summerville, that a man may find himself very much out in his estimate of values when he comes to the Final Audit. Eh? Your valuation and mine, for example—how much is our romance worth in the

alembic of mortality? Men wear tolerably in the practical grind; but women—is a man worthy their tears after all?”

He smiled, but his head leaned wearily against the high back of his chair.

“In Heaven’s name, Levignet, what is the matter with you? You are not yourself—and there is something about you that——”

“Gives you the horrors?”

“That alarms me. Something has happened——”

“Yes, a casualty; a leaf whipped from the tree; but you see me fighting shy of it in spite of the swift running of the sands in my tiny glass. We are palterers to the last, are we not, Jack?”

It was the first time he had addressed me by that familiar name, and the word came like the revelation of overwhelming things. I felt as if my heart had been gripped in a suffocating pressure. I tried to speak, but only leaned forward with my hand on his arm, staring into his pale face, waiting, knowing what he would say.

His eyes closed slowly, but the wan smile remained on his lips.

“You remember the story I told you of the palatine Banéban?”

“My God! Levignet.”

“Call me Banéban.”

An impulse to lock the door, barring out the

world brought me to my feet, and I crossed the supper room, but as I turned the key of one door, a waiter entered at the other.

"M. Pontfort desires to speak to M. Levignet," he said as I came toward him.

Pontfort was the Prefect of Police, but I should have pushed the waiter from the room and closed the door, had not Levignet cried out:

"Ah, my old friend! Invite him in, Summer-ville."

The Prefect was in the hall and entered without bidding. He nodded for the waiter to go, and shut the door. His strong, clean face showed signs of deep emotion. He passed me without speaking and went up to Levignet, who held out his hand.

"Eh! Pontfort, do you intend to get a supper out of me as well as the luncheon I offered you for to-morrow? Well, there will be room for you at the table, and even you cannot exhaust the Foyot cuisine, gourmand."

"I do not come to sup, Marcel Levignet. It is not your friend Pontfort who has come—but the Prefect of Police."

"Quibbler! The fact that the Prefect of Police has come in person and unattended proves that it is my friend Pontfort who refuses me his hand. But I'm strangely sleepy, Pontfort."

"Mon Dieu, mon Dieu! Marcel—old friend

Marcel, how was it possible you could commit such a crime?"

He seized Levignet's hand as he spoke and there came a gush of tears from his eyes.

"Crime, Pontfort? The instrument of divine retribution, my friend, knows nothing of crime. I have played an ordered part; but truth to say, I did not play it altogether well. I have always told you, Summerville, the Clifton was a marvellous woman. Admirable to the last. Too clever to let me have all the honours. No; honours are easy between us."

He spoke slowly, sleepily, and the last words were hardly more than audible.

"You are faint, Levignet; I'll ring for wine," I said.

"No. Let no one come, I need nothing."

He said this clearly, but the next instant his eyes closed, and I heard him murmuring, "Greater love hath no man."

He looked up. "Ah! It is you, Pontfort. Take my hand. And you, Summerville. There was to have been a fête. We were to have been merry. Well, let us not be sad. The roses are here. 'Toinette will come. Roses and 'Toinette. What better for an evening's end—or a life's? For me—what could I give to love but roses and life! Roses and life. Roses and life. A carriage has stopped at the door. De Noel is

handing out 'Toinette. 'Toinette in white. She is dressed for my fête. I must go to welcome her."

He had closed his eyes when he took our hands and he talked dreamily and at last seemed to fall into a slumber, the scarce breathing slumber of a child. It was so natural and easy, and his smile was so serene, and there had been so little to arouse a doubt that his drowsiness was due to anything other than fatigue, that I was startled when Pontfort exclaimed:

"His hand is like ice. He has fainted. Get some water."

He bent forward and unloosed the coat Levignet had kept buttoned to the chin, but as he flung it open he uttered a great cry and staggered back as if he had received a blow. Turning to look, I heard 'Toinette's voice as the door of the further room was opened for her. But for that, I too, would have cried out in the agony of that terrible surprise and the shock of knowing that he had sat there through so many wasting minutes, with never a word or plaint or warning on his smiling lips. Trembling, I caught together the folds of his coat, and hurriedly buttoned them over his breast—the brave, generous breast that was altogether done with troubling.

'Toinette in the room beyond, jested, laughing, with de Noel.

“Truly, *mon ami*, we have come in advance of our host. May we not arrange some trick to punish this truant Levignet?”

Pontfort went in to them and closed the door, leaving me alone with my friend.

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ONE who will may read in the journals of the day what I choose to omit from this memoir of a man I loved. It is not in the deeds of men, but in the motive to conduct, that the Angel of Judgment will search for the Jewel of great price. To pass through the portal shriven or unshriven, to go forth with the oil of pardon on the brow, or only with the light of a serene soul in the tranquil smile—what does it matter, if the man has lived in unselfishness? If at the last I may wear such a smile as made the still face of Marcel Levignet beautiful in the sunlight of the perfect morning, men may speak of me as they will—it will be well with me.

And yet Levignet missed the knowledge of his greatest service. It was the third day of the Charity Bazaar. Prostrated by the grief and nervous shock 'Toinette was kept from her booth on that awful day. It was as if the spirit of Levignet had saved her from flame, as years before he had rescued her from the water. In death as in life, he was her benefactor.

The calamity of the afternoon made Paris forget the sensation of the morning. But three of

us, de Noel, Pontfort and I, followed Levignet to Père Lachaise.

The morning after, my trunks ready for my quitting Paris, I went for a lone farewell visit to my friend's grave. It was in the remote corner of the cemetery where four generations of Levignets were at peace. As I entered the enclosure I saw a woman lying face down across the new mound. She did not answer when I spoke to her. I touched her on the shoulder. I raised her head to look into her face.

It was old Suzel. There was a new image of St. Joseph in her hand. Her clothes were drenched and earth-splashed.

It had rained through the night.

THE END

**This book is under no circumstances to be
taken from the Building**

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